15¢
DIME
THE LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE
APRIL
WESTERN
MAGAZINE
4 BIG NOVELS 4
GUN-CUB OF OUTLAW RANCH
by WALT COBURN
RED GRASS GROWS IN HELL!
by TOM W. BLACKBURN
LAWSON
VAN CORT
CHADWICK
WELLS FARGO

Uncle Tom & Little Eva awritin'...

Hattie Beecher married a teacher rich in learning and little else... turned to her pen, wrote short sketches. Later, the death of one of her children made her realize the tragedy of a baby torn from a slave-mother. She revolted at a society which could consider a man a *thing*. When a friend wrote: "Hattie, if I could use a pen as you can, I would write something that would make the whole nation feel what an accursed thing slavery is!", she rose to her feet, clenched the letter, said, "I will write something... I will if I live".

UNCLE TOM'S CABIN or Life Among the Lowly flowed from her fluent pen, brought tremendous acclaim as a serial. The book aroused a country against racial injustice, forged anger into action, prepared the public for the Emancipation Proclamation.

Mrs. Stowe wrote on brown grocery wrapping paper when no better was handy, with a primitive pen. Today everybody can have a far finer writing implement, the Inkograph, with a smooth 14kt solid gold ball-like point that writes with the ease of a soft lead pencil on any kind of paper... is rugged yet light, durable, dependable, lasts through years of service. Eye-attractive, it looks like a much more expensive fountain pen, but costs only $2.00.

At your dealer. Inkograph on the barrel and clip marks the genuine.

• • •

Exclusive features...

Suits any hand or style of writing... Writes smoothly on any quality paper... Withstands child's roughest usage... Unequalled for clean carbon copies with original in ink. Point won't bend or spread... Does lettering or ruling without smudge or blot... Gives years of unfailing service. Fully guaranteed.

INK-O-GRAPH $2

Inkograph Co., Inc., 200 Hudson St., N. Y. C. 13

"DON'T TELL ME YOU NEVER HAD A CHANCE"

"Ten years ago you and I worked at the same machines. We were *both* discontented. Remember the noon we saw the International Correspondence Schools' advertisement? That woke me up. I realized tbat to get ahead I needed special training. When I marked the I. C. S. coupon I asked you to sign with me. You said, 'Aw, forget it!'

"I made the most of my opportunity and have been climbing ever since. You had the same chance I had, but you turned it down. No, Jim, you can't expect promotion until you've trained yourself to handle bigger work."

There are lots of "Jims"—in factories, offices, stores, everywhere. Are *you* one of them? Wake up! Every time you see an I. C. S. coupon, your chance is staring you in the face. Don't turn it down.

Right now over 100,000 men and women are fitting themselves for new responsibilities and advancements through the study of I. C. S. Courses covering nearly every field of industry and business.

You can join them, get in line for promotion, prepare for tomorrow! Mark and mail this coupon, and find out how.

INTERNATIONAL CORRESPONDENCE SCHOOLS

ICS

BOX 3278-V, SCRANTON 9, PENNA.

Without cost or obligation, please send me full particulars about the course *before* which I have marked X:

Air Conditioning and Plumbing Courses
- ☐ Air Conditioning
- ☐ Heating ☐ Plumbing
- ☐ Refrigeration ☐ Steam Fitting

Chemistry Courses
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chemistry, Analytical
- ☐ Chemistry, Industrial
- ☐ Chemistry, Mfg. Iron & Steel
- ☐ Petroleum Refining ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

Civil Engineering, Architectural and Mining Courses
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Architecture
- ☐ Bridge and Building Foreman
- ☐ Building Estimating
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Coal Mining
- ☐ Contracting and Building
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Lumber Dealer
- ☐ Reading Structural Blueprints
- ☐ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Drafting
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

Communications Courses
- ☐ Electronics
- ☐ Practical Telephony
- ☐ Radio, General
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Radio Servicing
- ☐ Telegraph Engineering

Electrical Courses
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Lighting Technician
- ☐ Practical Electrician

Internal Combustion Engines Courses
- ☐ Auto Technician ☐ Aviation
- ☐ Diesel-Electric
- ☐ Diesel Engines ☐ Gas Engines

Mechanical Courses
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Flight Engineer
- ☐ Foundry Work
- ☐ Heat Treatment of Metals
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Metallurgy
- ☐ Machine Shop
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Mold-Loft Work
- ☐ Patternmaking—Wood, Metal
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Drafting
- ☐ Sheet-Metal Worker
- ☐ Ship Drafting ☐ Ship Fitting
- ☐ Tool Designing
- ☐ Toolmaking
- ☐ Welding—Gas and Electric

Railroad Courses
- ☐ Air Brake ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Locomotive Fireman
- ☐ Railroad Section Foreman

Steam Engineering Courses
- ☐ Boilermaking
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Engine Running
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Steam Electric ☐ Steam Engines

Textile Courses
- ☐ Cotton Manufacturing
- ☐ Rayon Weaving
- ☐ Textile Designing
- ☐ Woolen Manufacturing

Business and Academic Courses
- ☐ Accounting ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Arithmetic ☐ Bookkeeping
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Business Management
- ☐ Certified Public Accounting
- ☐ Commercial
- ☐ Cost Accounting
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ First Year College
- ☐ Foremanship ☐ French
- ☐ Good English ☐ High School
- ☐ Higher Mathematics
- ☐ Illustrating ☐ Motor Traffic
- ☐ Postal Service
- ☐ Salesmanship ☐ Secretarial
- ☐ Sign Lettering
- ☐ Spanish ☐ Stenography
- ☐ Traffic Management

Name..... *Age*..... *Home Address*.....

City..... *State*..... *Present Position*..... *Working Hours*.....A.M. to.....P.M.

Canadian residents send coupon to International Correspondence Schools Canadian, Ltd., Montreal, Canada.
British residents send coupon to I. C. S., 71 Kingsway, London, W. C. 2, England.

A DISCOUNT TO DISCHARGED VETERANS—SPECIAL TUITION RATES FOR MEMBERS OF THE ARMED FORCES

★ THE WORLD'S LEADING WESTERN MAGAZINE ★

15¢ DIME ALL STORIES COMPLETE

WESTERN MAGAZINE

MAY ISSUE PUBLISHED APRIL 3rd!

VOLUME XLV APRIL, 1946 NUMBER 4

Four Complete Western Novels

Red Grass Grows In Hell!.....Tom W. Blackburn 10
Clint Cammomile could join that mysterious Cabezon Syndicate—at the point of a gun—or swap his Shoulder-Blade spread for smaller holdings, in a development called Boothill!

Gun-Cub of Outlaw Ranch.....Walt Coburn 36
Before he joined the occupant of that lonely grave upon the hill, Pete Isom vowed he would toll those four murder-mad renegades back to the golden booty behind the Red Wall—and a homecoming in hell!

Blood-Trail.....Van Cort 60
A deadly, unknown killer was waiting to assist John Ware's search for the woman who had put her life in his hands—and his back in line for a bushwhack bullet!

Ride Wide of Wolf Rapids!.....Art Lawson 80
The girl with the hair-trigger shotgun told Jack Boyle he could tell Nick Burton to go to hell .... Which happened to be where Jack was going—if he could take Burton with him!

Three Colorful Short Stories

Law of the Desert-Born.....Louis L'Amour 30
Shad Marrone had killed to live ..... Now, with the desert-wise Lopez tracking him, he must live to kill!

Measure of a Man.....Joseph Chadwick 52
Reb Hanna and the dude Englishman seemed unable to find common ground ..... except on which to die!

The Chips Were Down!.....“Cimarron” George Bolds 75
When Adolph Ensley, K. C. Saloonman, offered those two punchers $500 for a ton of buffalo chips, they thought he was loco.

—And—

In the Saddle.....A Department 6
Maybe a King can do no wrong, but two authors violently disagree!

Frontiersmen Who Made History.....Cedric W. Windas 59
A fighting Texan like Ros Chapman could die in only one way—fighting!

High-Graders' Heaven.....John Y. Quayle, Jr. 79
Even the miners' pants in hell-roaring Goldfield turned up gold pockets!

ALL STORIES NEW **NO REPRINTS!**

Published every month by Popular Publications, 2256 Grove Street, Chicago 16, Illinois. Editorial and executive offices, 205 East Forty-Second Street, New York City, 17. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary. Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter November 30, 1935, at the post office at Chicago, Ill., under the Act of March 3, 1879. Title registration pending at U. S. Patent Office. Copyright, 1946, by Popular Publications, Inc. All rights reserved under Pan American Copyright Convention. Single copy price 15c. Yearly subscription in U. S. A. $1.80. Foreign postage 75c additional. **Subscription Department, 205 East 42nd Street, New York City, 17.** For advertising rates address Sam J. Perry, 205 E. 42nd Street, New York, 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts kindly enclose stamped, self-addressed envelopes for their return if found unavailable, and send them to 205 East 42nd Street, New York City, 17. The publishers cannot accept responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts, although care will be exercised in handling them. Printed in U. S. A.

"What's he got that I haven't got?"

LOOK at the successful men you know. "What have they got" that you haven't?

Very little, probably. In most ways these men are no brighter or naturally more capable than average. Many of them probably have no more formal education or better natural aptitudes than you.

But that little extra they have is important. They have the special knowledge and ability for which business is glad to pay well—they know the what, why and how of business. They have also the confidence and aggressiveness which come from knowing that they know and can apply their knowledge.

You may add that extra—may get that same profitable knowledge and ability—that same confidence and aggressiveness—if you are willing to pay the price in earnest, necessary study. For LaSalle has spent 37 years developing, testing and proving, with over a million student members, spare-time success training in certain specialized business fields. What scores of thousands of men and women—many just like you—have done, you should be able to do.

You need not leave your home or interrupt your job; you need pay comparatively little money. But you must be ambitious and willing to study seriously. And soon after you start training, the results will begin to show up in your own confidence and in your work. For what you learn at home tonight is so practical that often you can apply it on the job tomorrow.

How much do you want success—more money, a promotion or a new job, prestige and responsibility? If you really want it, you will use the coupon below to find out what LaSalle training can do for you. It costs only a postage stamp, but a coupon like it has been the starting point to real success for scores of thousands—and can be for you.

LA SALLE Extension University
A Correspondence Institution
Dept. 4334-R • 417 S. Dearborn • Chicago 5, Ill.

I want to know how LaSalle can help me win success in the field I have checked below. Please send me your free 48-page booklet about that field and your success training in it.

☐ Accountancy	☐ Salesmanship
☐ Bookkeeping	☐ Effective Speaking
☐ C.P.A. Coaching	☐ Executive Management
☐ Business English	☐ Industrial Management
☐ Law: LL.B. degree	☐ Traffic Management
☐ Foremanship	☐ Stenotypy

*Name*_____ *Age*_____

*Position*_____

*Address*_____

*City, Zone and State*_____

LASALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
A Correspondence Institution

IN THE SADDLE

OUR friend, B. E. King, of Long Beach, California, seems to have started a first-class augering match as a result of his letter in January *Dime Western* concerning old-time Army sergeants, in particular, and the Old West's Indian fighting army in general. Now two of *Dime Western's* top-hand authors, Frank Bonham and Harry F. Olmsted, go on the prod, editorially speaking, to call E.B. to friendly account. The pow-wow is now open to one and all; so go ahead, Frank Bonham:

Editor, *Dime Western:*

Who is this old trooper, B. E. King, who is taking a couple of saber-swipes at me in January *Dime Western?* He had the kindness not to mention my name, but I didn't need a telephone book to determine that he meant me when he referred to the Army stories "he had been reading recently."

I'm happy to get criticism from anybody on my yarns—even my barber scolds me now and then. But I reserve the right to fight back. Let's take these criticisms of Mr. King's, for instance:

He doesn't like my use of Irish sergeants, claims most of the men in the Army were Prussian. What did he think happened to the Irishmen who built the U.P. in 1869? They joined the Army. I've read Army rosters of the '70's, and they sound like a page from the directory of County Cork.

And I'm very sorry to say, in regard to his criticism concerning my troopers sweating, that the Army, in its multifarious bulletins and regulations, has never been able to prevent the emission of perspiration from the pores of an overheated soldier. The soldier to whose "salt-encrusted" uniform I referred, had just reached Fort Stoneman, A. T., from Jefferson Barracks. I believe we can allow him a little sweat, considering that he carried a pack across three States and a Territory.

And by the way, my fort didn't have a "pump-house." In fact, I doubt that any fort in Arizona did. My understanding of a pump-house is a place where a motor-driven pump is enclosed, for the pumping of water. We didn't have gas or electricity in Arizona in those days—remember, Mr. King?

Let's talk about sabers. Sure, my troopers used them—after they had emptied their guns in the attack! (See Page 31, *Dime Western,* July 1945.)

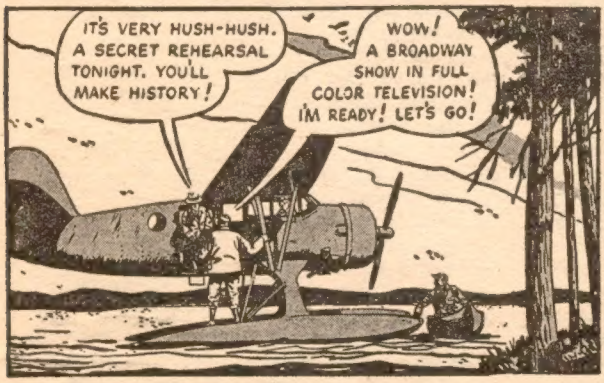
And I guess I'll have to go to bat with Mr. King over his criticism that my cavalrymen need not have let sick horses worry them, when they had only to send to Camp Verde for remounts. How does he know where Fort Stoneman was—at what distance was it from Camp Verde—since, (to the best of my knowledge and belief), there never *was* a Fort Stoneman! Like most fiction writers, I am cagey enough not to pin myself down too closely. But let's say the two camps were five miles apart. The idea was that the trapped infantrymen in the mountains could hold out only so long. They had to be saved, and right now. There wasn't time to send anywhere for remounts. May I also say that I took the fundamental idea for this story from the historical fact that, in 1882, General Crook's entire army was set afoot by an epidemic among his horses. With Mr. King I say, "Heck! What was the matter with the remount station in Washington, D. C.?"

There is some error, I think, in Mr. King's quoting the pay of a Cavalry sergeant as eight dollars per month. Of course, it all depends on the time you're speaking of. But in the early '80's, at the time I was writing of, a sergeant got $17

(Please turn to page 8)

Bob Got Out Of The Woods In A Hurry When...

IF THAT BLASTED PLANE HADN'T SCARED HIM, I'D HAVE SHOT THAT MOOSE
LOOK... HE'S LANDING ON OUR LAKE. LET'S SEE WHAT'S COOKING!
BOB ALLEN, YOUNG ACTOR, RESTS FROM A LONG RUN ON BROADWAY BY HUNTING UP NORTH


IT'S VERY HUSH-HUSH. A SECRET REHEARSAL TONIGHT. YOU'LL MAKE HISTORY!
WOW! A BROADWAY SHOW IN FULL COLOR TELEVISION! I'M READY! LET'S GO!

I THINK YOU WERE MARVELOUS
JOIN US FOR A LATE SNACK, ALLEN. I'VE GOT GREAT PLANS FOR THIS SHOW... AND YOU'RE IN THEM
SEE WHAT A THIN GILLETTE SHAVE DOES FOR A MAN!

YOU ALWAYS GET REFRESHING, GOOD-LOOKING SHAVES WITH THIN GILLETTE BLADES, FOR THESE ARE THE KEENEST, LONGEST-LASTING, LOW-PRICED BLADES YOU EVER USED. AND BECAUSE THEY FIT YOUR RAZOR PRECISELY, THEY PROTECT YOUR FACE FROM THE SMART AND IRRITATION CAUSED BY MISFIT BLADES. ALWAYS ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES
THIN
Gillette
BLADES
4 for 10¢

(Continued from page 6)

a month. He also got forty cents a day if he did clerical duty. A lowly private received $13.

The defense rests!

Thanks a lot, Frank Bonham, for a mighty interesting and informative letter—and now Harry Olmsted breaks into the pow-wow to haze the talk back to Camp Apache. And say, is that a chip we see on your shoulder, Harry?

Editor, *Dime Western:*

I have just finished reading Mr. B. E. King's contribution to the current *Dime Western,* wherein he takes a crack (perhaps well deserved; I have not read the story he refers to) at writers of yarns about the Apache Indian Wars.

I am not blind to the fact that the tenure of the Indian story hangs on a slender thread, due to the temptation to exaggerate, due to the ever-present possibility of error or conflict of historical reference and due to attacks by those well meaning souls who may or may not be correct. A little good argument along controversial lines is a tonic, but Mr. King makes some remarks which I cannot allow to go unchallenged.

Mr. King does not say he campaigned during the Indian Wars. (He will have to be at least 85 years old if he did.) The fact that he slept with soldiers doesn't make him one, any more than my sleeping with some Navajo hunters (which I did some years ago) makes me an Indian. But one thing sure, Mr. King never saw Camp Apache and has only the vaguest idea of his Apache-land geography.

His reference to Tom Horn taking the Government Trail to Apache from Wingate is bad. Tom was a scout under Al Sieber, at San Carlos—seventy miles southwest of Camp Apache. Wingate is almost 150 miles northeast of Apache. The three lie almost in a straight line. Tom Horn, a scout on the Apache reservation, had no call to travel to Wingate in the Navajo country—certainly not to get to Camp Apache.

King says Tom was quoted as saying he'd have to be "logged with whiskey" to go the direct way. Why? The Reno Supply Road ran from Fort Bowie to Camp Reno, in the Tonto Basin, on through Reno Pass to Camp McDowell. And there was a well-traveled military trail from Reno to Cooley, crossing the Camp-Verde-Camp Apache road at Phoenix Park, 20 miles northwest of Del Shay's Spring, at the head of the Cibicue. No, Tom must have been very drunk when he said that—if he did.

Perhaps, as Mr. King says, nobody bothered to map Camp Apache, but it has been and is far from forgotten. It was garrisoned by Negro soldiers when I was there in 1916. It may be garrisoned now; I cannot say. In 1870 the camp was equipped for two hundred soldiers—20 barracks buildings of logs, storehouses with supplies for 4 companies for one year, 9 2-room offices, hospital, guardhouse, stockade corral of 9-foot logs with shed around the inside—capacity (mounts and remounts) for two troops of cavalry and seventy-five quartermaster mules. Its supply route ran through Old Camp Goodwin (out of Tucson) and the road was open from May 1st to January 1st.

As for the pump house, that we had better skip. Water was supplied from White Mountain River by fatigue detail. Some of the desert camps were indeed served from a pump, but it was a hand affair and unworthy of housing. If the fighters had had to depend on pumphouses, there would have been no fisticuffs.

Now about this business of "sweat-crusted." I have never seen the troopers come in from their Indian hunts, but I have seen them ride back to quarters from scout patrol, through summer heat running well above one hundred degrees, and you couldn't tell whether they were white or colored, so foul were they from sweat and dust. Does Mr. King think those boys spent all of their time in barracks? He proved that such is not the case by saying that four thousand soldiers took four years of continuous travel to corral seventy Apaches, who gave up because they got tired of running. Hogwash!

I wonder if Mr. King ever heard of The Battle of the Salt River Caves, where 52 soldiers wiped out one hundred and fifty Apaches in a supposedly impregnable fortress? How about the battle of *Muchos Cañones,* at the head of the Santa Maria, where Col. Mason and the 5th cavalry from Whipple, forever broke the power and fighting spirit of the Apache-Mohaves? And the Battle of Turret Butte, where Major Randall and the 23rd Infantry annihilated the Tontos, making those tribesmen very, very sick of war.

There may have been four thousand soldiers altogether, during the comings and goings of the Apache Wars, though I can find no statistics to bear out so great a number. Many, a very great many, deserted, for the climate was cruel, the service gruelling, the food bad and relaxation totally lacking. Add homesickness to these and you will understand how the turnover might have totalled four thousand in a matter of four years.

(Please turn to page 97)

INTRIGUE IN MEXICO CITY!

KILLERS IN THE SHADOWS!

ROMANCE TO THE RHUMBA!

PAT IN HIS GLORY!

From the celebrated COLLIER'S story of glamorous adventure!

COLUMBIA PICTURES presents

Pat O'BRIEN
with
Ruth WARRICK

Perilous Holiday

with

ALAN HALE · EDGAR BUCHANAN · AUDREY LONG

and EDDIE LeBARON and HIS CONTINENTAL ORCHESTRA

Screenplay by Roy Chanslor

Based upon the Collier's Magazine serial by Robert Carson

Produced by PHIL L. RYAN · Directed by EDWARD H. GRIFFITH

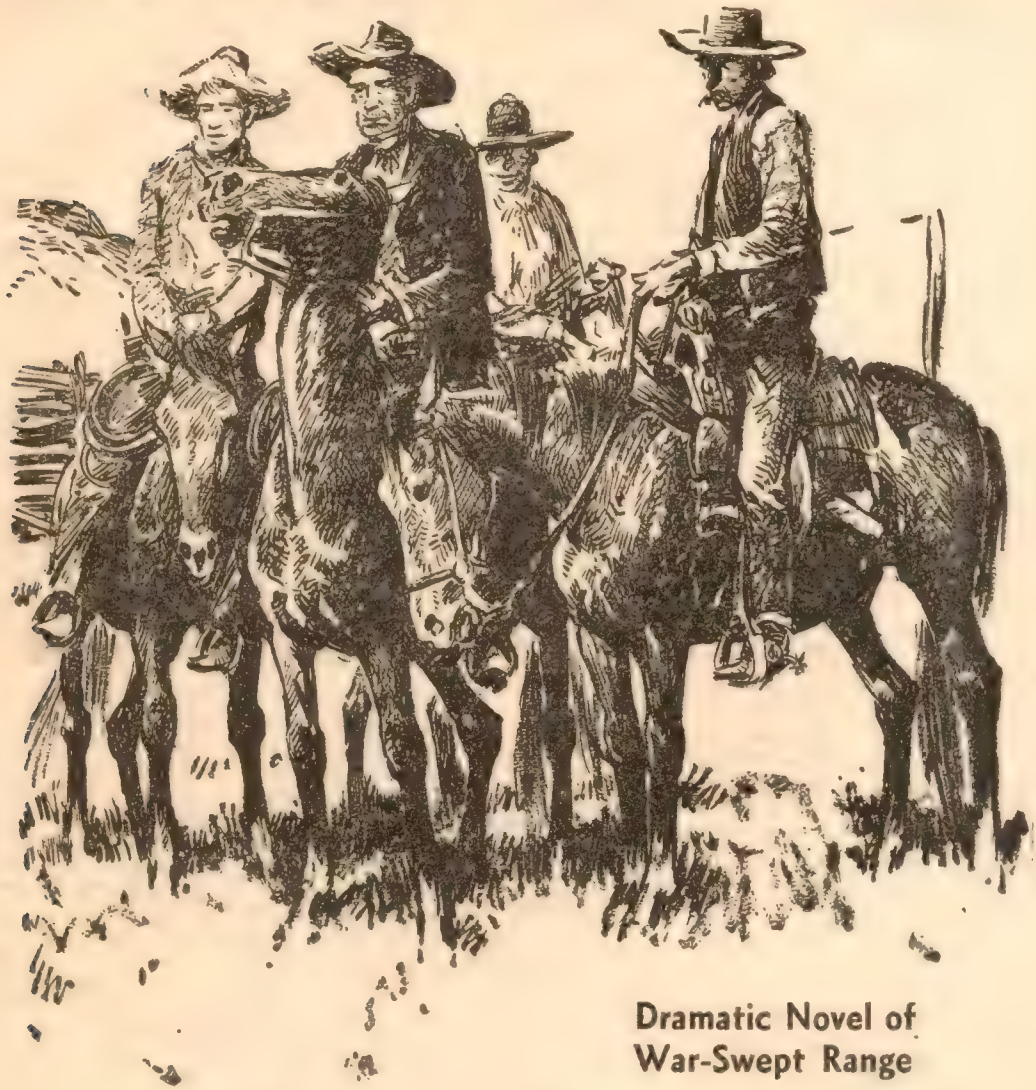
RED GRASS GROWS

"This place isn't worth ten thousand," Clint responded bluntly.

Cow combines that invite a man to join up at the point of a gun somehow didn't appeal to Clint Cammomile. . . . But he knew that to keep Shoulder-Blade he must probe the deadly secret behind that Cabezon Syndicate, or, with the salty girl from the French Heel, sell out—for sure, prompt payment in bushwhack lead!

IN HELL!

By TOM W. BLACKBURN



Dramatic Novel of War-Swept Range

CHAPTER ONE

Hostile Range

THE Cabezon was one of those startlingly rich, green valleys which are scattered through the general aridness of northern Arizona. The history of the Southwest had marched through it, as that history had marched through every other watered place between the mouth of the Colorado and the mountains behind Santa Fé. The first dwellers in the Cabezon had realized its value and had jealously guarded it. Their ragged stone sentinel towers stood at the head of The Turrets, the gaunt pinnacles at the lower end toward the colored desert, and on the approaches of Skull Pass, against the continental divide.

Titles to land in the Cabezon dated beyond the War for Independence and the first entries bore proud Spanish names which could be found chiseled into the limestone of Inscription Rock and engraved on the earliest maps of the Southwest.

Cammomile had known on that first day, when he had ridden in from rail's end at Blue

Water past the Turrets to the foot of the valley and his own land, that he had made a shrewd deal. He knew he had found the piece of ground for which he had been looking. Passing weeks had not changed that conviction. He had tided the abandoned house on his land and made it habitable. He had ridden his boundaries and tallied such stock as was left on the place. In general, he was completely satisfied.

The market was poor—so poor that stock drives from so remote a section as this were not profitable at the moment. But he had only a bare skeleton herd, acquired with the ranch. He needed time to build that herd up. And when he had stock worth driving to Blue Water for shipment, the market would have turned upward. This was a Texan's optimism, and Cammomile had the kind of temperament that could endure waiting.

The challenge of the unworked range was an antidote for restlessness and he welcomed it. He made two short trips with a patched buckboard into the town of Cabezon for supplies. He stayed briefly and talked little. Come winter, he might want companionship, but this was the working season and because this was so he had made no friendly overtures.

As a consequence, he was surprised that the town, or the valley—whichever it was—should come to him. He watched the riders filing through his wire gate into the yard behind the small 'dobe house with narrowed eyes. The four men had the manner of a deputation with business on their minds. They didn't seem like neighbors making a social call. It was not aggressiveness, but a small feeling of uneasiness which made Cammomile strap on his belt gun before he stepped out into the sun.

The leader of the party in the yard was a large, thick-bodied, gray-faced man with a great shock of unruly sandy hair and exceptionally small, deep, widely set eyes. Cammomile gathered an immediate impression of personal force and an utter lack of fear as most men know it.

"Clint Cammomile?" this man asked in a blunt voice.

Clint nodded.

"My name is Amos Leighton," the big man went on. "Like you to meet Buddy French, Tom McGinley, Art Camp. We want to talk a little business with you."

"Light down," Cammomile invited without commitment.

The quartet swung down and gathered under the veranda, where there were benches and a pair of chairs.

"This place has always been called the Shoulder-Blade," Leighton said. "Aim to keep on using the same brand?"

Clint nodded again, watching his guests curiously.

Leighton grunted. "Well," he said, "we learned you bought the Shoulder-Blade in Kansas City from a niece of the family that used to own it. I don't mind telling you that if we could have found that woman before you did, you wouldn't have gotten this place!"

"Something personal?" Cammomile murmured. "I doubt anybody here ever saw me before."

"Oh, hell, no!" Leighton said irritably. "A piece of the valley going to a stranger just sort of cuts up some plans the rest of us have been making, that's all. And that's what we rode out to talk to you about. We hear you gave eight thousand for the Shoulder-Blade, sight unseen. We've left you alone a month so's you could look it over. We wanted you to find out how many days of fence patching lay ahead of you, how poor your stock is, and how busted this whole valley is under present markets. Now we've brought you an offer. We'll give you ten thousand for the ranch as she lays. That's a darned good profit for a month's work and a trip out from Kansas City."

There was a self-assurance about Leighton, and aggressiveness, which Cammomile did not like.

"The place isn't worth ten thousand in its present condition, good market or bad," he responded bluntly. "So if you'll go that high, there must be a reason. I don't reckon I could give you a final answer till I knew what that reason was and whether there was chance of squeezing a little more money out of you because of it."

Leighton frowned. He glanced obliquely to the slight, nervous boy whom he had introduced as Buddy French. The boy's lips flattened down and a peculiar pallor came up in his face, robbing his otherwise attractive features of any pleasantness.

"We don't take squeezing!" he snapped in a suddenly brittle voice.

Cammomile studied him briefly. He was a familiar kind—a tightly wound spring, living on an inner fire and completely dangerous because his control was so thinly held. Camp and McGinley, the other two, were scowling bleakly. This deputation—which could have been neighbors on a friendly call—rapidly was assuming the menacing look of a pressure group.

Cammomile rose to his feet. "Boys," he said quietly, "I don't give a damn what you'll take or not take. I've got work to do and it won't get done while I sit here."

French made a sharp, almost involuntary move forward. His gun was suddenly very prominent, low and snug against his thigh. Cammomile snapped him a bleak glance.

At the same moment Leighton warned abruptly, "Easy, Kid!" and turned back to Cammomile. "All right, friend," he said grudgingly, "we'll let down our hair a mite, then. The whole blamed Cabezon has been having a rough time. We're all in bad shape, and there's only one sound way out of it. The deal is this: We're syndicating this whole valley. Everybody is deeding his land, his stock, his gear, to the syndicate, everybody's taking back share certificates in exchange. It means that all of us will have the advantage of quantity buying on supplies, and of contract selling. We'll make one drive a season to Blue Water instead of a dozen or more. And when we ship, we'll fill a train. We can get that kind of orders and we can come out that way. It's the valley's only chance and the Shoulder-Blade is the only brand that's outside, so far. We want you in—and we'll credit you at a face value of the offer I just made you—ten thousand dollars. That's a fair enough deal—"

"It's a fair offer," Clint agreed, "but I'll have to have time to think it over. I'll let you know."

"We're short of time," Leighton said aggressively. "We can't give you much time. There's a meeting in town tomorrow afternoon at the Wagon Wheel Saloon. I'll expect you there—with your answer."

The big man turned and walked heavily out to his horse. Buddy French lingered for a moment.

"Better be there," he said thinly. "It might be too bad if we had to come out for you."

CHAPTER TWO

"Come With Us!"

CAMMOMILE sat a long time before his fire in the ranch house, and when he turned in, he locked the wide front door for the first time since his arrival in the Cabezon. Amos Leighton's visit might, Clint knew, be a bona fide business proposition in which the entire valley could be legitimately interested. But there had been a certain overbearing manner about Leighton; and something tense and dangerously high-strung about young French.

Clint turned out of his yard shortly after sunup the next morning and rode slowly, a thing he had not before been able to afford to do. A slow ride took time. But he wanted to know the entire lie of the valley before he reached the town of Cabezon and he watched the floor of it unroll before him with narrowed eyes. Cabezon Valley was naturally isolated. Sandy, eroded dune-and-barranca country, dry and virtually impassable, lay on the north and west. Due north, back of the Shoulder-Blade, rose the pinnacles and tower-studded knife-backs of the Turrets. From the Turrets, angling from northeast to south, was the sheer granite facing of an old mesa wall. Clint recalled his maps had named this Long Ridge.

From the arid badlands, running from northwest to south and a confluence with Long Ridge, ran the high granite backbone of the divide. Access to the valley was possible only through a saddle lying back of the Shoulder-Blade, between the badlands and the rise of the Turrets, and through a well-defined pass at the point where Long Ridge and the divide ran together in the extreme south. Clint noted with interest that the Shoulder-Blade, because of its dog-leg boundaries, lay wholly across the evident trail and any other usable path between the saddle in the north and the town of Cabezon, far down the valley toward Skull Pass in the south. Thus, travel of any kind, including stock drives, from Cabezon town to rail's end at Blue Water, must cross his land. Clint noted this and rode on.

Twice in the early morning he detoured when he caught sight of the buildings of other ranches off to the right. Each time he kept to higher ground and rode close enough to study the places with his saddle glass. They looked singularly alike. Sound buildings, but run down from lack of attention. There were a few thin herds grazing on home grass, and few horses. The signs all spoke plainly of difficult times and retrenchment.

Within sight of the town of Cabezon, Clint turned left three or four miles to get within glass distance of a third ranch. It had the same look as the other two. Finally he rode on into Cabezon with the thought that perhaps Amos Leighton's plan of a syndicate which would permit concerted action by the valley people was a solution to a problem which obviously needed correction.

Coming up through Cabezon's street, Clint marked the Wagon Wheel Saloon. A number of horses were racked up before it and a raggedly lettered sign in the window proclaimed a meeting in progress with saloon business to be resumed at sundown. Without particular appetite, he by-passed the Wagon Wheel and stepped into a small lunch room. The only other customer was a girl at one of the front stools. Cammomile eyed her with a Texan's appreciation.

She was obviously troubled, or at least deeply engrossed with something. He could not tell which. At any rate, the slight, puckering frown across her arched brows lent an attractively serious note to her piquant features. Cabezon, he had decided by the time his order was served, had more virtues than its green grass and the water from the little creek which meandered through the valley.

Shortly after Clint began to eat the girl

went out, leaving him with a feeling of pleasure and a troubling sense of recognition—as though he had known this girl, but could not place her.

Half an hour after his entry into town, Cammomile left the lunch room and drifted across to a much smaller saloon than the closed and impressive Wagon Wheel. He had two drinks, setting his mind in order before facing the meeting. He would, he thought, string along with the rest in the valley. There was only one thing. He would ask for a provision in the organization set-up for disbanding the syndicate Amos Leighton proposed when better times made the functioning of the plan unnecessary.

With this decision made, he was just finishing his second drink when the door of the little hole-in-the-wall batted open and two men came in. They strode swiftly down the room toward Clint. With the sun from the street in his eyes he was a little slow in recognizing Art Camp and Buddy French—two of the three who had been with Leighton at the Shoulder-Blade. His slowness left him flat-footed. French had a drawn gun in his hand and Camp was backing him up. The two of them stopped in front of him.

"Damn you, Cammomile!" French bit out. "Have we got to wait all day? Get a move on!"

Clint frowned. His voice was deceptively soft. "You want that loose jaw in a sling, son?" he inquired.

The color drained from French's face, and his gun prodded Clint's belly.

"Start moving for the Wagon Wheel, Cammomile, or by hell there won't be any vote from you to count!"

Cammomile slouched back a step, his own quick anger coming up hard. Art Camp, without any effort to ease the arrogant sting of his companion's orders, shuffled forward.

"Better come along, Cammomile," he said bluntly. "Likely you aimed to, anyhow, but make it now. It'll be easier that way."

CLINT realized that both of these men were in deadly earnest. He noticed another thing. The rest of the trade in the little saloon, three or four hustlers and roustabouts and one who looked like a clerk of some kind, had turned their backs, taking great care to appear disinterested in the proceedings. Clint knew then that these small men were afraid of the two who had just come in.

He eyed young French with keener respect. This sallow-faced bundle of raw-ended nerves and bad manners was apparently dynamite. And the gun he held was apparently no bluff; he would use it, if he had to.

Cammomile turned toward the door. Art Camp kept abreast of him, stepping a little forward to push open the panel ahead of him. Buddy French held close behind and once, when Cammomile broke stride to step through the door, the youngster did not check himself in time. The muzzle of his piece rammed solidly against Cammomile's spine.

Camp stepped across the walk, angling straight for the Wagon Wheel. There was a little traffic on the street but neither of his two escorts, Clint noticed, paid the slightest attention to those on the walk. And Clint was again aware of the hurried preoccupation he had first noticed in the little saloon at his back. Someone, he decided grimly, had thrown a hell of a scare into Cabezon.

When the three of them were half the distance across the rutted street, a woman called out sharply:

"Leland! Leland French—wait!"

Out of a corner of his eye, Cammomile saw a girl quit the walk they had just left and run toward them. He recognized the girl he had noticed earlier in the lunch room. And then, suddenly, he understood the vague sense of recognition which had troubled him. There was a similarity between the girl's attractiveness and Buddy French's pinch-faced arrogance which made doubting the relation between them impossible.

At the girl's cry, young French had veered away from the man he was escorting, an oath springing to his lips. Camp, also, had halted and turned. Cammomile felt free to do likewise. French stood a yard away from him, staring at the approaching girl with a queer admixture of desperation and bitterness. The girl's face was white, but a sweeping, healthy anger was up in her eyes.

"Lee, put that gun up!" she said angrily. "What in the name of heaven are you trying to do?"

"That's my business—and Cammomile's. I told you to keep out of this. I know what I'm doing, and you're not helping any by butting in this way."

Camp shoved a little ahead, a hard truculence showing in his eyes. The girl flung herself forward. As she came against French, she grappled for his gun and tried to twist it from his grip. He stepped back in an effort to fight free. At the same time, his patience frayed out.

"You asked for this, Anne!" he said thinly.

His free hand swept back. Camp's shoulders bunched and he also reached for the girl. Cammomile saw that the two of them would spill her into the dust. French, in stepping back, was now close to him. Cammomile's hand shot out and caught the youngster's thin shoulder. He spun French about. French's gun snapped up involuntarily. The girl cried out. And in that instant Cammomile hit French hard in the center of his face.

The gun exploded. Cammomile felt the sting

of grained powder as the charge missed him by an uncomfortable narrow margin. But the weapon was held by a suddenly limp hand and French was tipped far backward on his way down. Clint caught the youngster's gun by the muzzle and jerked it free of his slack fingers. Art Camp, slowed a little by Cammomile's sudden interference, had already caught the girl. Realizing French was out of it, Camp now tried to swing the girl in front of him while he freed his own weapon.

Clint Cammomile's impatience was up now, and the girl was wincing with the savagery of Camp's grip. Rocking forward on the balls of his feet and reaching over the girl's head, Clint struck solidly downward with the butt of French's gun. The bone handle bit through the cushion of air under Camp's hat and connected sharply with the man's skull. Camp staggered backward a step and pitched crazily off to one side, lying motionless where he had fallen.

Cammomile thrust French's gun under his belt and spoke quietly. "Ma'am, they're waiting for me across the street—" he tilted his head toward the Wagon Wheel "—but I reckon a talk with you might be more important just at the moment."

DOES YOUR FACE blaze after a close shave? • Make it beam! Shave with Star Double Edge Blades. They're here again—to step up your comfort!
STAR DOUBLE EDGE BLADES
4 for 10¢
AVAILABLE AGAIN!
STAR DOUBLE EDGE BLADES
MAKE YOUR DOUBLE EDGE RAZOR PERFORM MIRACLES!
MADE BY
GNX
REG. U. S. PAT. OFF.
PROCESS
STAR IS MADE by a secret process that produces a blade so tough it's super-keen and longer-lasting, too. So uniform you can count on a snappy shave, a happy face—every time!...Star Division, American Safety Razor Corp., Brooklyn 1, N. Y.

The girl shot him an oblique glance, looked down at her brother's bloody face, and shrugged with a sudden deflation of spirit.

"Talk won't solve anything," she said bitterly. "But come along, if that's what you want."

She turned and started toward the open door of the *Cabezon Courier* office, directly across the street from the Wagon Wheel.

CHAPTER THREE

Burned Bridges

AN OLD man was hunched over a littered, flat-topped desk in the *Courier* office. He glanced up as Anne French led the way through the gateless railing across the office.

"Eb, Lee said this man's name was Cammomile. He was heading for Leighton's meeting across the street with Lee and Art Camp making sure he would get there. That's all I know about him, but I'd guess he was the new owner of the Shoulder-Blade and he reckoned he wanted to talk to me."

The old man pushed his glasses up onto his forehead and came out of his chair. He was tall. He stooped a little to bring his eyes level with Clint's.

"You playin' deuces for a smile from Anne or you really want talk—and answers, stranger?" he inquired challengingly.

The man's integrity was obvious, and his truculent bluntness amused Clint.

"I'll take the answers," he said.

The old man eyed him closely, muttered under his breath, and finally flung out a single word.

"Well?"

"Who's Amos Leighton, for instance?" Clint suggested.

"Was a shipping agent, working out of Blue Water. When the market got so bad there wasn't any use in driving Cabezon cattle across the rails he came into the valley—to help us out, *he* says!" There was a fine irony in the old man's words.

"And Camp?"

"Don't know. He came in with Leighton—does Leighton's riding for him, and some other chores besides. Like the one he and Buddy French started on you with. Buddy—Lee French—is Anne's brother, no credit to her. A little older than her, their folks left the French place to him in trust for them both. Leighton got next to him and pulled the French place into the Cabezon Syndicate ahead of anybody else. With a pardon for Anne's being here, I reckon Buddy is wearing about the same size shoes as Art Camp—so far, anyways."

He paused, putting his sharp glance on Cammomile. "But looky here, friend, you've had your turn. Figurin' you are Clint Cammomile and owner of the Shoulder-Blade, all right, I'll have me an answer. You've been approached and know the deal, or Buddy and Camp wouldn't have jumped you. How do you take to this syndicate idea, son?"

"Like a cat takes to water," Clint said flatly. "There's something wrong with a deal that a man has to be pushed into. And I don't wade till I know I can swim."

The old man grinned with a sudden warmth. He kicked out a wire-braced, round-runged chair from which the back had been broken.

"Sit down, Cammomile. Sit down!" He turned eagerly to Anne French. "Girl it looks like we're done going it alone. We got us a man with at least one ounce of brains out of all the fools in this blasted valley!"

The girl had been looking out the window. She shrugged dispiritedly. "It will take more than that," she said quietly. Turning, she fixed somber eyes on Clint.

"You move fast, Mr. Cammomile," she said. "For years Lee has made such a thing of the way he could handle a gun that I never thought I'd see a man take one away from him. But that settled nothing. I don't know about Art Camp—none of us do. But I think he is more dangerous than Lee. And I can tell you this. You may have other enemies, but you'll find my brother the worst of the lot. Something has gone wrong inside of him. And you won't disarm him again!"

The old editor of the *Courier* chuckled dryly and without humor. "That's enough trouble for one gent. But there's more, Cammomile. Wait till Leighton hears you're bucking the syndicate. And nigh everybody in the valley but Anne and me'll go against you with him. It will be a tough fight."

Clint glanced out the window. Young French and Camp were gone from the street. He shrugged.

"Leighton will be guessing pretty close to the truth, right now," he murmured. "Maybe I've kept that meeting waiting long enough. . . ."

The old man at the desk thrust out a big, ink-stained hand. "Good luck, son. Whatever help the *Courier* can give is yours for the asking."

Clint nodded, and Anne French followed him to the door. He was aware of a vestige of perfume about her, an aura of warmth. But a strong, grim restraint was in her, too.

"The French Heel was my birthplace," she told him, "and the Cabezon is my home. But Lee is my brother—nothing can change that. He's sick; I'm sure of it, and I want you to remember that. I told you the kind of an enemy Lee can be. But I'll warn you now that if anything happens to him, his hatred of you would be mild compared to mine."

CLINT stepped down into the street. The conviction was in him that his wisest course would be to hit saddle and ride north onto his own land. A man who did not force an issue usually had time to prepare defenses against anything. But a tide of sympathy for the old newspaper editor and for the girl across the street was running through him suddenly.

These two, out of the many other quiet, inoffensive little people of the Cabezon, still had the courage to speak out against something they believed to be wrong. Perhaps, if those others had leadership, they, too would speak out . . . perhaps even join in the fight. . . .

Walking briskly but unhurriedly, Clint crossed the street and pushed through the doors of the Wagon Wheel. A rough semblance of an open meeting had been achieved within the saloon by placing a small table and a few chairs on the piano dais at the upper end of the room. The rest of the chairs were arranged on the sawdust-littered floor, facing this dais. Amos Leighton, looking even larger in a closed room, sat at the table on the little platform. Camp, still dishevelled and dusty from the tangle in the street, sat beside him. Buddy French was behind them, looking moody and restless. An aisle was open through the chairs below the dais. Cammomile moved up this unhurriedly. He veered off in front of the table and circled it to stand before French.

Extending the youngster's gun to him, butt first, Clint spoke quietly but with enough pressure to carry his words to everyone in the room.

"I've been told I'd never be able to disarm you again, French," he said. "I just wanted you to know that the next time I won't try."

His meaning was unmistakable. Stepping back, Clint swung around to face Amos Leighton.

"Mr. Chairman," he said with subtle irony, "I understand the business of this meeting has been waiting on me."

Forced into formality, Leighton held his anger in check and nodded.

"It has. Proceed, Mr. Cammomile."

"I have considered your proposition from every angle, and I have secured sound advice on it. The Shoulder-Blade will not, under any conditions, become a part of any syndicate headed by men who are not themselves landowners in the Cabezon and therefore have, beyond any question, the interests of the valley at heart. I will be glad, at any time, to discuss the syndicate question further—when new officers have been elected to replace Amos Leighton, Arthur Camp, and Leland French!"

There was a sudden gasp in the crowd, followed by a mutter of talk in which Clint detected a slight flavor of approval for his stand. Leighton was livid. Camp and French were watching him narrowly. Secure in the knowledge Leighton's men could do nothing before this crowd, Cammomile turned on his heel, walked the length of the saloon to the street, and went directly to his horse. In a matter of moments he was loping out of town —with his bridges burned behind him.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Syndicate Strikes

CAMMOMILE was within sight of the Turrets, with only a low rise between him and his own boundary, when he noticed a funnel of dust rising behind him. A single rider was coming out hard from town, obviously intent upon overtaking him. He reined up to wait. The buildings of his closest neighbor—the first place he had surveyed with his glass on the way into Cabezon—lay off to the south, with the blue silhouette of Long Ridge rising high above the house and out buildings.

He rolled a cigarette, smoked it slowly, and had just ground out the stub when the rider hammered up and reined his horse to a halt. Clint recognized one of the men from the gathering in the Wagon Wheel.

"Thanks for waiting, Cammomile," the rider said. He was an elderly man, with a seamed, bearded face. "You've saved me a ride on over to your place. I'm Luke O'Connell. That's my spread in under the ridge, over there. Reckon I'm your closest neighbor, if that means anything."

Cammomile nodded. "It might," he said non-committally.

"Look, I like the sound of the talk you made back there in town. I got out of the meeting as quick as I could and had a talk with Ed Choate and Anne French. Seems they like your cut, too. I aim to pull out of the syndicate and ride along with you. A man that's lived his life on grass hadn't ought to let a couple of bad seasons stampede him into something he might live to regret."

Cammomile studied O'Connell carefully. He had been thinking that he might have gone a little too far. He wondered, now.

"A syndicate could be a good thing in some ways, O'Connell," he said cautiously. "You know the valley, and how things lie here. I don't. That's why I shied off."

O'Connell snorted. "Maybe the syndicate idea is all right. But here's the stieker with me. I'm ten years past the age a man ought to be pounding a saddle. I've had title to my Crooked Iron range near onto forty years. And I've hung onto it. Know why?"

Cammomile shook his head.

O'Connell pointed up the valley toward

the distant notch where the divide and Long Ridge flowed together. "That's Skull Pass, up on the other side of town," he said. "Eight thousand feet, that's all, and water grade on both slopes. Onate came through that way, and Fremont and Carson. Butterworth ran his stages through here. Why? Because Skull Pass is the best road across the divide in three hundred miles. Things over toward the Colorado valley are opening up, and there's a lot of cattle running on the Gila, southwards of the pass. If that ain't enough, the south end of California has got to be tapped some day. And if the rails should start moving west of Blue Water, my Crooked Iron would be worth the forty years I've spent on it. Damned if I want to deed it off—even to an organization that I'd have a part in. I didn't figure I could stand alone, but by hell, I'll stand with you!"

Cammomile nodded soberly, his eyes on the distant pass. This was a thing of which he had not thought. He had measured Leighton's planned syndicate on a basis of land values and ranching operations. On that basis, he had been unable to see a margin of profit wide enough to tempt dishonesty. On that basis he had been forced to concede that Leighton's plan was likely honestly conceived and that the man's whole benefit from organizing the valley would be his commissions for stock shipped through Blue Water. O'Connell's talk of rails opened a new vista, and Cammomile saw he might yet have more than a hunch as a basis for his distrust of Amos Leighton.

"You peeled right out of town," he remarked now. "Anybody there know you're bolting the syndicate plan, O'Connell?"

The old rancher nodded. "Never hid under a bush in my life," he said proudly. "Couldn't go home to my wife if I did. When Eb Choate and the little French girl backed you, it was enough for me. I caught Leighton out on the street and tore up his damned deed form right in front of his face. Told him if he had any more business with me he'd have to come out to my place to transact it."

"Then likely he'll come," Clint said somberly. "I didn't make a friend of Leighton or young French or Camp. I doubt you've made friends of them, either. Until the rest of the valley swings around to us or there's a showdown forced, I reckon we'd better ride light saddles and keep out of the brush."

O'Connell looked incredulous. "That's the kind of talk I used to hear when I first came into the Cabezon. Hell, man, we've had our roots down a long time, here. We've got our law and we're a quiet kind. Leighton's rough in the way he crowds a man with talk and he's almighty fired up over his syndicate. But we'll sit on our rights and we'll have no trouble. There hasn't been a killing in the Cabezon in fifteen years. That's the old way and it's all done!"

Clint shrugged. He was remembering Camp's sullen features and the taut, flaming wickedness in Buddy French's eyes. The Cabezon was a far more remote place than the Panhandle, but men were still dying in Texas to protect their rights, their land, and their stock.

"Keep a watch, anyways," he suggested mildly. "I'll get down your way in a day or two and we'll see if we can get some of the others to pull in with us."

O'Connell lifted his hand, wheeled his mount, and rode off toward his own place. A little later, from the summit of the small rise separating his own land from O'Connell's Crooked Iron, Cammomile reined up and looked back. The old rancher had disappeared into the bosque-studded creek bottom which cut across one corner of the Crooked Iron.

NEAR sunset Cammomile was in the lean-to which served him as a smithy, forging up a new clevis linkage for the heavy old wagon he had acquired with his place, when a shadow fell across the door of the shed. He glanced up, squinting through the forge grime which had accumulated on his brows and lashes. Anne French stood in the opening.

Cammomile shoved a quick bank onto his fire and stepped into the open, aware that he was no social figure, stripped to the waist as he was and with the heavy muscles of his torso overlayed with a powdering of soot and cinders.

The French girl, he discovered, was not alone. She had with her a small, straight-backed, graying woman whose thin face was held in iron control while her eyes mirrored a sick and shaken desperation. The French girl did not seem as friendly as she had in town.

"This is Mary O'Connell, your nearest neighbor, Mr. Cammomile," she said curtly. "Three or four hours ago Mary found her husband in the willows along the creek below their place with a bullet hole in his back."

Cammomile was stunned. He recalled he had warned O'Connell, but even as he gave the warning he had not thought the danger was this grave or that trouble would hit so soon.

"You didn't know Luke O'Connell, and his being dead doesn't mean much to you," Anne French went on. "But this part of it will. He was at the meeting in town. Before he started home, he stopped at Eb Choate's and asked Eb and me how we measured you. We told him we had a hope that a man had come into the Cabezon who could keep the

valley people from ruining themselves by joining Amos Leighton's syndicate. Luke allowed that since you were a neighbor and had a stiff back he'd track with you. He told Leighton he was pulling out of the organization. Now, five hours later, he's dead!"

The girl's attitude was challenging. He was forced to meet that challenge. "You think there's something I can do, then?"

Anne French shrugged. "About Luke?" she said bitterly. "No. Not even a Texan can change that, Mr. Cammomile. But Luke was proud of the long period of peace we've had here. So are some of the rest of us. And this has been a bad beginning. Dead men are a poor exchange for Leighton's plan. We'd all do better to be in the syndicate—good, bad, or indifferent—than to have other women left as Mary is left, with a destitute ranch and no way to make it pay with her man gone."

"There's only one thing I can do, Mr. Cammomile," O'Connell's widow said quietly. "It is not what Luke would want done, but I have no choice. When I learned Luke had planned to stand with you, I insisted Anne ride over with me so I could tell you. Luke had a six-thousand dollar offer from Leighton—six thousand dollars in syndicate shares, that is. I'll have to take it."

Cammomile admired this little old woman's staunch courage. The old, he knew, could stand grief as the young could not. But this woman was accepting defeat, also. His mind ran swiftly over his own affairs. Acquiring the Shoulder-Blade had about cleaned him out, but there was one thing he could do.

"I'd rather see you follow your husband's lead, ma'am," he said gently. "I know you'd rather follow it, yourself. I'd like to expand in this valley, if the syndicate can be discredited. Suppose I take an option on the Crooked Iron at ten thousand dollars. It is worth closer to that. Suppose I pay you five hundred dollars for that option. If the syndicate is not successful and I decide to take up the option and finally purchase your ranch, we can work out the details of payment later. Until then, would five hundred dollars carry you along?"

Anne French looked sharply at Clint. He saw that she was wholly surprised and not quite certain in her reaction. Mary O'Connell, however, had no uncertainty.

"I think Luke would have liked you to have the Crooked Iron, Mr. Cammomile," she said steadily. "I'll accept your offer."

Clint nodded and led the way to the house. He drew up a short option form and offered it to Mary O'Connell for her signature. Then, with Anne French as a witness, he paid the woman five hundred dollars.

Anne paused in the doorway a moment to speak softly to him. "You're a hard man to figure, Clint Cammomile," she said.

They stepped out into the sun to find Mary O'Connell staring up at a body of horsemen reined in before the rail fronting the house. Amos Leighton bulked large in the party, as usual. Art Camp was beside him. These two were the only familiar faces in the bunch. Leighton grinned wickedly at Clint.

"Buying up the O'Connell property, eh, Cammomile?" he guessed shrewdly. "You work fast, once you've got started. Art, take your man into custody!"

"Custody?" Clint grunted. "Me? Somebody else is being a little fast!"

Leighton shrugged. "I thought you'd have some sympathy for Mrs. O'Connell, but if you won't—" The big man repeated his shrug. "The sheriff of this county headquarters at Blue Water. We didn't have time to send for him. A party of citizens gathered and appointed Art deputy, *pro tem.* Till the sheriff gets here, Art's got authority to arrest you."

"For what?" Anne French asked.

"Murder," Leighton said, enjoying the word. "Tracks in the dust are plain enough if there's somebody to read them. When we heard in town what had happened to Luke, a bunch of us here rode out on his trail. He caught up with Cammomile just over the

ridge, back there. Might have been an argument. Maybe not. I don't know. Anyhow, the two of them started toward Luke's place. Down in the willow bottoms Luke was killed and Cammomile came on here."

"I'd like to see those tracks," the French girl said quietly.

Leighton scowled. "We were more interested in following them to see where they went than in preserving them," he said. "I'd judge they were pretty much scuffed up, by now. But we've got witnesses that saw them before they were—Art, myself, Ben Moffet, here, and Angus Thorpe. Disqualify Art and me if you want, Anne. But a Cabezon court will take the word of Banker Moffet, and Angus Thorpe's word is as good as his bond in these parts."

"Did you see Luke this afternoon, Mr. Cammomile?" Anne asked in a tight voice.

Clint nodded, about to explain. She gave him no chance. A look of cold hatred came over her face. She caught Mary O'Connell's arm and piloted her hurriedly toward the buckboard in which they had ridden over from the Crooked Iron. Art Camp slid from his saddle, crossed to Cammomile, and snapped a handcuff to Clint's wrist. Leighton edged his mount close and leaned down.

"You should have taken my offer yesterday, Cammomile," he said smoothly. "Today it's too late."

Camp made no effort to close the other link of the cuffs on Clint's free wrist. Clint glanced curiously at him. The man grinned without humor.

"We'd like to have you try a break-away—before the sheriff gets here in the morning. We'd like that fine, Cammomile."

CHAPTER FIVE

Get Cammomile!

CAMP'S invitation to attempt escape—before the sheriff arrived in the morning—was a stronger warning than any other threat could have been. Clint realized that Leighton and Camp, without a legal representative of county law present would like nothing better than to invoke the old Spanish *ley de la fuga,* in which a condemned man was permitted to race for safety against the guns of his captors. The odds were impossible.

Therefore, Clint rode quietly, using this time to study the faces of those who rode with him. Leighton and Camp he knew. It was the other two who interested him. Ben Moffet, he decided, belonged with Leighton and Camp. A wizened, empty-faced man, he would be essential to any syndicate operation—or rather, his bank would be essential. Clint recalled syndicates attempted in Texas and Kansas. They had invariably been tied to a bank, from which the syndicate borrowed heavily after organization. Then, at the proper time, the bank foreclosed on the syndicate property and resold it. The banker and the syndicate organizers cut up all the profits of this sale above the bank's loans, leaving the stockholders in the organization entirely in the cold and without legal recourse. Moffet's connection with Leighton, together with the man's obvious personality, seemed to indicate that the Cabezon Syndicate would be little different from those others.

Angus Thorpe, however, was different. Craggy-browed and dour of face, he carried himself with the unintentional erectness of a man of integrity. Without knowing the man better it was hard to be sure, of course, but Clint felt that Thorpe was a man deeply troubled. Therefore, if this matter of the tracks on the road was to be straightened out, Thorpe probably would be his best bet. . . .

The party escorting him into town made no event of Clint's arrival, but took him up through the back lots to what he judged was the rear of the Wagon Wheel. Dismounting there, they thrust him ino a small, windowless room with a heavy door. One or two of them remained outside for a time. Finally the door reopened and Buddy French stepped in. The door was closed again. This was overdone caution. A guard inside and out. Cammomile scowled at it. He didn't like being penned up with a man as mercurial and unpredictable as French.

Time dragged. French made no effort to talk, and Clint began to get over his feeling that French had been detailed to goad him into some overt act. It was late in the evening when he decided to attempt getting a message past French.

"I'd like to see Eb Choate," he said.

French looked curiously at him. "Why? Eb'll do you no good. Might have, once, but he's too old, now. And Anne will have fixed him up, as far as you're concerned. Better be quiet and let it go at that, Cammomile. You're done. This valley don't take to murderers!"

"No?" Clint said mildly. "Maybe it doesn't take to them, but it's sure raised a nice crop for itself. I want to see Choate."

French shrugged and went to the door. He held a brief conversation with the guard outside and returned. He sat down without comment afterwards and Clint braced himself to wait. His thought on Choate was that if she old newsman came down, he'd get him to see Angus Thorpe. The conviction still persisted in Clint that Thorpe was at odds with his conscience.

His answer came from Choate sooner than he expected—in the form of a folded copy of

the *Cabezon Courier*. Spread across the front page in scare headlines was the announcement that Luke O'Connell's killer had been captured. Below it was a fiery denunciation of the transaction he had concluded with Mary O'Connell. Anger came up in Clint. He recognized Anne French's bitterness in this tirade, and yet at the ranch he had been certain that she knew he had not wanted the O'Connell place. He had been certain she understood the option he had offered to take from Luke's widow had merely been an attempt to keep the old woman on land she obviously loved—and to give her a little money to tide her temporarily. He had thought that Anne had even known that the five hundred dollars he had paid to Mary O'Connell had cleaned him out of much needed operating cash. Yet here was the girl attacking him ruthlessly.

According to Choate's story, his purchase of an option from Mary O'Connell was damning proof of his elaborate planning to secure control of the entire Cabezon—"by bushwhack, bluff, and greenbacks," as Choate put it. There was only one heartening note in the story. Under the scareheads, in a small box, was another installment in what appeared to be a continued argument against any landholder in the valley subscribing to the Cabezon Syndicate.

Anne and the old editor appeared still to be fighting in their own way, even if they had turned on the ally they had welcomed that afternoon.

"A little devil and an old fool!" Cammomile muttered.

French looked up sharply. "And a dead duck," the youngster finished for him.

Clint said nothing more. French rose and crossed the little room. He picked up the paper and glanced at the little box about the syndicate, ignoring the scarehead story. After a little, he threw the paper down.

"Sis is going to pull the whole damned thing down on top of her!" he muttered.

"Push it over for her first, then," Clint suggested, breaking in as calmly on French's thoughts as French had intruded on his own.

"Push what over?" French growled.

"Leighton's syndicate," Cammomile answered calmly. "It stinks. You know that, French. You know you're on the wrong side of the fence. You won't have a friend left in the valley. There's nothing in it for you to help Amos Leighton pull this deal—whatever it is he's aiming at. Get out of it. Stick with Anne. You owe it to her."

The youngster paced restlessly. "What the devil do you know about it?" he snapped. "What do I care about having friends left? That doesn't mean anything to me. But you're wrong about Anne. That's what I'm in this for. If she'd only let me alone for a few weeks longer, everything would be all right. She'd be set for life. But she's got to meddle—and I don't like meddling, Cammomile. That goes for you, too, so keep your trap shut. I don't want your talk!"

CAMMOMILE shrugged and remained silent, watching French curiously. He had a feeling that if he could discover what was troubling Lee French he'd have the angle on Leighton's whole scheme. French continued to pace back and forth across the improvised cell. A little later Leighton came to the door and called him out. Clint heard their bootfalls move around the building toward the front. After a time, through the thin partitions of his cell, he heard Leighton's heavy voice. Apparently the two of them had gone around to the front door of the Wagon Wheel and come back through the saloon to some rear quarters adjoining the place in which they were holding their prisoner. Cammomile wondered if they realized they were as close to him as they were. He decided not and pressed his ear against the wall.

The securely nailed boards of the partition served as a sounding surface. When he stood away from the wall Clint could recognize Leighton's voice only by its heaviness and its overtones. With his ear against the wood solidly he could plainly hear the words being spoken.

"I tell you, Buddy, it isn't enough for you to tromp around just looking tough," Leighton was saying. "Either you're in this or you're out. There's no half way. If you're in, you can't leave all the dirty work to Art. I tell you, too, that things are jamming up on us. If we've still got Cammomile locked up in the morning and Sheriff Bent comes in from Blue Water, we'll look like fools!"

"Not with Ben Moffet and old man Thorpe swearing tracks out there on the Crooked Iron showed plain who killed Luke O'Connell," French maintained.

"That's just the trouble," Leighton growled. "Angus Thorpe's been thinking this over since we hit town. And the more he thinks, the more he realies those tracks don't prove what we said they did. Moffet'll stick by us—he's got a cut coming when the deal heads up, and Ben likes his money. But we can't buy old Thorpe and we can't put him out of the way. Not now, anyways. So he's gone over to Eb Choate's and told Eb and your sister he don't rightly think Cammomile killed O'Connell. He thinks it was more likely somebody that followed Luke out from town. And he aims to see Sheriff Bent first thing when he shows up from Blue Water tomorrow."

French whistled. "Things *are* jamming," he agreed. "Damn it, Amos, I warned you something like this would happen. There

wasn't any good reason for Art to track Luke down and kill him. It was plain asking for trouble."

"That's done," Leighton retorted harshly. "When you play for blue chips you've got to play hard. Your belly turning soft, or isn't your cut big enough to suit you any longer?"

Cammomile could sense the terrific pressure Leighton put into the question. There was a long moment of silence. Finally French spoke dully.

"All right, Amos," he said. "What'd you want done?"

"Art has ridden out the Blue Water trail," answered Leighton. "He's got a little chore at Cammomile's place—sort of insurance that we've pulled all that Texan's teeth. Art aims to meet Sheriff Bent out that way. The sheriff won't be coming on to Cabezon—unless maybe on a door. I'm going to turn Cammomile loose. He'll naturally head north, toward his own place. Well we'll hang the sheriff's death on him, too."

"You're spreading it too thick, Amos," French protested.

"Oh no I'm not!" Leighton retorted. "You're going to follow Cammomile—and you're going to make him disappear. It'll look like he bumped into Bent, shot him out of the way, and kept on going. That'll give us a clear road to title on the Shoulder-Blade. I think Ben and I can find a way to use Cammomile's option, once he's permanently out of the way, to swing the O'Connell place into the syndicate.

"It's the last play, Buddy—or close to it," he went on. "With the Shoulder-Blade and the O'Connell place lined up with us, Ben can make his loans and start squeezing. In ninety days we'll be ready to send Art out to Blue Water to talk business with the big boys there. . . ."

French made some answer Clint could not catch. The two men apparently had moved out into the Wagon Wheel again. There was nothing more to hear.

CHAPTER SIX

Ambush Trail

IT WAS considerably after midnight when the door of Cammomile's prison was opened. Someone in the party outside carried a bright lantern. Clint recognized Eb Choate, Thorpe, Anne French, and Leighton. There were a number of others. In spite of the fact that it was he who had opened the door, Leighton gave every appearance of being under duress and of disapproving of this gathering.

"I tell you you're being hasty!" he protested with a not wholly convincing heat. "Luke O'Connell's dead. *Somebody* killed him. And nobody knows anything about this Texan. The best thing would be to hold him till Sheriff Bent gets here in the morning."

"The hell with that!" Eb Choate growled. "He's a citizen—he's got rights. And after what Angus told us about how you pressured that deal out there where the tracks met, this whole thing stinks. Turn the man loose, Leighton—and do it quick."

Leighton shrugged. "Angus agreed with Camp and Ben Moffet and me when we were looking at the tracks. By changing his mind, he may be turning a killer loose."

The man kept just enough truculence in his voice to chafe the nerves of the others. Leighton, Clint saw, was clever. He was building this just right. When Sheriff Bent was found dead the next day, every man in this party would feel a little guilt and Leighton, himself, would be in the clear. For a long moment Clint was tempted to refuse freedom. He was tempted to demand being held until the arrival of the sheriff. It was the one way he could protect himself from further charges that might be piled against him by Leighton's scheming.

But so long as he was a prisoner, he could do nothing toward ferreting out the reason behind Amos Leighton's desire to gain control of the Cabezon through his syndicate. And while he was prisoner, he could not track down Art Camp, nor find out the nature of Camp's errand to the Shoulder-Blade. And he wouldn't be able to come up with Camp before the man ambushed Sheriff Bent. These things seemed more important, just now, than further protection for himself. He stepped out through the door.

Nodding thanks to Choate—and to Anne and the uneasy Thorpe—he turned on Amos Leighton.

"There's something I want you to write down in your book, Leighton," he said quietly. "I've been pushed just about as far as I can go. The next man that dies in this valley is going to be inside of your syndicate—not outside of it. Better remember that."

Clint swung away from them then and walked briskly toward the livery barn, where he presumed his horse would have been put up. He was right. The sleepy-eyed hostler seemed a little surprised, but he indicated the animal's stall and the rack where Clint's saddle hung.

Saddling up, Clint led the horse to the door, then stepped into the livery's cubbyhole of an office.

"Got a gun in here?" he asked abruptly.

The hostler betrayed the weapon with an involuntary glance at an upper drawer in a battered desk. Clint pulled the drawer open and found a fair Remington belt gun. There was also a partially filled box of shells. He

pocketed these, thrust the gun into his belt, and tossed a wrinkled bill down on the desk.

"That ought to cover the works," he said.

The hostler nodded and Clint mounted.

LEAVING town by the Blue Water trail, Clint veered off to the east a couple miles out, letting his horse pick its trail and driving toward the dark, looming base of Long Ridge. Once he was close under the rocky scarp, he swung north again. A good deal of the ground was broken and strewn with boulders. It made riding in the darkness difficult. And Clint had only a general idea of the lie of this valley. But this route was safer than the trail, and he reconciled himself to it.

Dawn was a promise back of the Turrets when he came up onto higher ground, from which his own place should have been visible. It was. An ugly red column of dying flame marked the buildings of the Shoulder-Blade. Even before he cut across the Blue Water trail on his way to the fire, Clint saw that his buildings were doomed. And he thought he knew how it had been handled. In such a way, certainly, that Camp and Leighton and the syndicate could not be blamed.

Leighton had a quick brain. Clint recalled that when Anne French and the O'Connell woman came over to see him, he had been working at his forge. He had banked the fire in the lean-to when he went into the house with the two women to draw up his option for the O'Connell place. Such a fire, rightly banked, would not spread. Yet conceivably it could.

Leighton or one of his men had recalled that banked forge, and that had been Camp's errand to the Shoulder-Blade tonight. He had been sent out to fire the ranch buildings. And tomorrow—if there was anyone interested enough to examine the place carefully—inspection would indicate that the wind had scattered coals from the banked forge. The fire, therefore, would appear as an accident which had occurred in Cammomile's absence, and as a result of his own carelessness. Camp would make certain no sign was left to indicate otherwise.

The Shoulder-Blade buildings had not amounted to much, but they had been satisfactory for a beginning and their loss would be crippling. Clint swore angrily. However, knowing the flames on the place were beyond any hope of control, he reined up when he reached the Blue Water trail. He was acutely aware that Buddy French, taut and dangerous, was somewhere behind him, riding with orders to overtake him. He had no doubt French would carry those orders out to the

A MASTERPIECE SIGNED IN BLOOD!
First he enshrined her beauty on canvas, —then consigned it to death!
THE MADONNA'S SECRET
starring FRANCIS LEDERER • GAIL PATRICK
ANN RUTHERFORD • EDWARD ASHLEY
with LINDA STIRLING
JOHN LITEL • LEONA ROBERTS
MICHAEL HAWKS
Directed by WILLIAM THIELE
A REPUBLIC PICTURE

letter. If French came up from behind, undiscovered, Clint Cammomile *would* vanish.

There was also the question of the ambush Leighton had said Camp was to set for Sheriff Bent. It would be along the trail, somewhere. Clint wondered if Camp would have drifted back toward Cabezon to wait for the officer. He doubted it. The fire on the Shoulder-Blade might attract some curious rider from down the valley. Camp would not lay his ambush where a casual intrusion might spoil it. Odds were that Camp was waiting for the sheriff on farther toward Blue Water —likely somewhere around the Turrets.

Cammomile wanted to break up that ambush. He wanted to break it up in such a way that not only would the sheriff escape it but he, himself, would come to grips with Camp. He hoped to learn something about the eventual goal of the Cabezon Syndicate that way.

Clint would have liked to drift carefully up the trail, keeping a sharp watch and moving silently, hoping that, since Camp did not expect interruption from this direction, there might be some sign to indicate where the man was hiding so he himself could be ambushed. This, however, required slow going and would take time—too much time. It seemed unlikely that Sheriff Bent would leave Blue Water until after dawn—until after breakfast. But French was behind Clint someplace and it was of French that he was thinking now.

He had, he judged, only one course. Setting his horse up the Blue Water trail, he let the animal out for the first time since he had left Cabezon. He held to the heavily sodded grass beside the trail where he could, hoping to keep his approach to the ambush as quiet as possible, and he rode low in his saddle, offering as little target of himself as possible.

Miles rolled by under the pistoning stride of his horse. Light in the east increased steadily, slowly thinning out the night gloom. The Turrets rose as steadily imposing barriers ahead and a little to the right. Bosque and brush clump and boulders came out of the darkness and slid past. Each might conceal the man for whom he was looking. Cammomile's nerves drew taut. He did not like the this kind of a ride.

His first warning that he had reached Art Camp's hiding place was the spiteful orange lance of muzzle flame from a rifle, almost at his horse's shoulder.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Fight on the Trail

THE flash blinded Cammomile momentarily. But the charge he had expected did not come. Camp had made his mistake, too. He had, apparently, seen Clint coming—or heard him—for some distance. He had wanted to make sure of his shot, and had held his fire. But he had held it too long.

Perhaps his target was approaching faster than he had thought. Perhaps the poor light had bothered him. However it was, his first shot missed Cammomile by a scant margin and before Camp could lever a fresh charge into the chamber of his rifle, Clint had come down hard on his near stirrup and quitted his saddle in a flying leap.

Camp was sprawled prone behind a low rock outcropping. Behind him was a shallow, steep-sided draw in which he had apparently hid his mount. Clint saw these things while he was in the air. Then he was down, hard, partly flung across Camp and partly across the rock behind which the man lay. He caught the muzzle of Camp's rifle, tore the weapon from the man's grasp, and sent it skidding across the gravel. Hauling himself forward, he spilled on down behind the stony outcropping.

With his rifle gone, Camp rolled to one side and clawed for the short gun at his belt. Cammomile only partly checked this move. The weapon came free, gripped tightly in Camp's hand and with Clint clinging grimly to Camp's wrist. Clint drove his free hand into Camp's face. Instead of slacking the man's grip, the blow infuriated him. He reversed the direction of his roll, drew his legs up, and threshed out with them. One spurred heel caught Cammomile in the groin.

"I want talk from you, not your damned scalp!" Clint grunted between his clenched teeth.

Camp remained silent. He was a powerful man, and wickedly skillful at ground fighting. Clint barely avoided another raking by booted heels and in doing so nearly lined his body up with the muzzle of the gun over which the two of them struggled. It became painfully obvious that Camp would do no talking. Regretfully, Clint switched his tactics suddenly.

Rolling with Camp, he used his weight to force the man's gun arm under the two of them. Their combined weight, plus the leverage Clint could exert, bent the arm excruciatingly. Camp suddenly released the weapon, scrambled clear, and came leaping back with a huge clasp knife sprung open. Clint was down on his side and one shoulder, caught in such a way he could not turn clear. He had secured Camp's gun. He tipped the muzzle up and fired while the man was in midair in his leap.

Camp landed across him heavily. The knife spun away into the grass. Clint wriggled out from under the dead man. In the sudden silence he heard the hoofbeats of a running

horse far down the valley course of the Blue Water trail. His lips tightened grimly.

French! That must be French—coming up hard toward the sound of gunfire. Swearing impatiently at Art Camp's stubbornness, Clint rifled the dead man's pockets. He had achieved nothing beyond saving Sheriff Bent—if French didn't bump into the officer and take care of him on his own hook.

Camp carried little of interest. There were only two items. One was a worn passbook containing an expired membership card in a Kansas City organization of railroad trainmen. Clint noted Camp was listed on the card as a brakeman. The other item of interest was a pocket-worn letter addressed to Camp at the Blue Water Hotel. The letter bore the return of the Pacific and Colorado River Railroad. Clint pocketed both papers, hurriedly caught up his horse, and lined swiftly into the twisting canyons and barrancas about the foot of the towering Turrets.

He was, he thought, less than five minutes ahead of Buddy French in getting away from the ambush Art Camp had set. Had it not been for his recollection of Anne French's plea for her brother, there in the doorway of the *Cabezon Courier* the day before, he would have waited for French and had his settlement with him, too.

As it was, he had learned nothing from Camp and there was a possibility that a little later he could trade with French on even terms. And through such trading he might open the lid on Leighton's syndicate. Consequently, he had hard saddle work ahead of him if he was going to shake off French and avoid a present showdown.

THE country about the foot of the Turrets was virtually impassable, but by luck and the device of giving his horse full head whenever possible, Cammomile managed to thread through the draws and side canyons at top speed. In a quarter of an hour the sound of French's pursuit had dropped back and faded out. Half an hour more in the maze suddenly brought him out on a little shelf with the single track of the Blue Water trail plainly visible below.

Clint dismounted here to blow his horse and watch the trail. While doing so, he took out the letter he had removed from Camp's pocket. It bore a date almost two months old. He read it with interest:

Arthur Camp,
Blue Water Hotel
Sir:

This company does not make a policy of dealing with discharged employees. However, since we are anxious enough to secure right of way through Cabezon Valley and property suitable for establishing Division Headquarters at Cabezon town—all at a reasonable figure—I will arrange to be in Blue Water for some weeks in about sixty days. If you and your associates are then in a position to deliver deeds to the Cabezon properties and rights of way which we will require for our line through the valley and Skull Pass, I will discuss figures with you at that time.

Yours very truly,
Jonas Harrison,
President,
Pacific & Colorado River Line

Cammomile let a long breath out through his teeth. He had not been disappointed in Camp, after all. Here was the information he needed. He was not surprised that landowners in the Cabezon knew nothing of the railroad's planned extension. Past experiences had taught the rail men to acquire all the land they needed before their plans leaked out. If they failed to do so, landowners were apt to set ridiculous prices on their property in an attempt to make themselves rich at the railroad's expense.

Nor was it surprising that a man who had formerly worked for the line should hear about the extension. A certain leakage was inevitable. It all pieced together as Clint thought about it. Leighton, a driving type so necessary to this kind of scheme, was all at loose ends with Cabezon cattle shipments halted because of a falling market. Camp had apparently approached the cattle agent with his information and probably the basic plan. Leighton had expanded it into something practicable.

They had come into Cabezon and secured Banker Ben Moffet's assistance. Once the ranchers had deeded their property to the syndicate they proposed, it would be necessary for the syndicate to borrow money on those deeds —supposedly for syndicate expansion and operation. These loans would be a paper transaction only, however, and presently the loaning bank would call for payment of the loans. Books would be advanced to show the syndicate had no profits and no way to make repayment. The bank would then foreclose on the syndicate property and sell it off. The syndicate would be bankrupt and the property would supposedly be sold for the amount of the loans only. The stockholders in the organization would be crowded out, having gotten nothing in exchange for their lands but worthless stock certificates. At this point, Leighton and Camp could hand Moffet a cut for the part his bank had played. The entire balance of the money paid by the railroad for the foreclosed properties would go into Leighton's and Camp's pockets.

It was not a pretty picture, but there still was one side of it Clint did not understand.

Leland French, somehow, did not fit into it. French was one of the ranch owners. In addition, he was administrator of his sister's share in their ranch. But he was not being swindled as Leighton had tried to swindle Thorpe and Luke Connell and even Clint himself. He was on the inside—a part of the scheme. It didn't make sense.

Clint shrugged. Take one thing at a time, he told himself wisely. The date on the letter was two months old. Jonas Harrison had said he would be in Blue Water in sixty days. The chances were that he was there now. The next step in unwinding the skein of deviltry Leighton and Art Camp had spun in the Cabezon seemed to be to get hold of the railroad man and lay the picture before him. The big roads, as a usual thing, had grown wary of shady deals. If Harrison could be persuaded the hard-up ranchers of the Cabezon would let him have his right-of-way and what else he needed at a reasonable figure, Leighton would be hamstrung. He would have no one with whom to deal.

Rising, Clint returned the letter to his pocket and caught up his rested horse. He was just turning his stirrup to his boot toe when a harsh, dry voice rasped behind him.

"Save it, Cammomile! You're not going anywhere."

CHAPTER EIGHT

French Checks a Bet

CLINT lowered his foot and turned slowly. Buddy French stood three yards away, his thin hands hooked in his heavy belt. The strain usually plain on the youngster's face was more marked than Clint had ever seen it. His eyes were unnaturally brilliant.

"I thought I shook you back in the Turrets," Clint murmured.

"You did," French said. "I was fool enough to haul up to see what you'd done to Art—as though I gave a damn—and you got too much of a start on me. But if you'd ridden the Cabezon as much as I have you'd know that a man going into the Turrets, where you did, has only got one place where he can come out again—right here!"

Clint shrugged. "A man takes his chances when he rides strange country," he said. "And now, since you're just a cheap roustabout for Leighton and have no special chores of your own, you'd better get it over with."

French frowned. "You know I'm supposed to plant you?" he asked incredulously. "Ah, I see it—those thin partitions in the back of the Wagon Wheel! But do you mean to say you left that nice safe lockup, knowing damned well that I'd trail you and Art was somewhere up ahead?"

Clint nodded.

"Why?" French demanded.

"Maybe just on account of myself," Clint said. "Or maybe on account of your sister and Mrs. O'Connell and a few others. The game you and Leighton and Camp were playing smelled like a dead gopher and I wanted to see where its roots grew. I reckon I know, now. Ever see this?"

Cammomile took the railroad company's letter to Camp from his pocket and extended it. French crossed warily and took the paper. He read swiftly, then looked up.

"You've got a long nose, Cammomile," he said thinly. "Sure, I knew about this. Only I thought the railroad had set the price low—too low to spread around to everybody in the valley and have any piece of it amount to anything interesting. Now that you've figured it this far, what did you aim to do if I hadn't come up on you?"

"Harrison is likely in Blue Water. I aimed to see him. I aimed to talk price on what he wanted. If he was fair, I aimed to take him back to Cabezon with me—so he could close his deals with each ranch—and to hell with your syndicate!"

"Since when does a Texan figure any railroad would be fair to a bunch of down-and-out stockmen with the odds stacked against them?" French asked bitterly.

Cammomile leaned forward. "French, I don't figure you," he said honestly. "There's fight in your sister, but she fights fair. Something's wrong with you or you wouldn't be tied up with a skunk like Leighton. I'd like to know what."

Color flamed in the youngster's cheeks. He stiffened, and Clint wondered if he'd strike without warning. The mood was in him. It showed plainly. Then something else came into French's eyes—a kind of horror as if at some inner physical struggle. His jaw muscles cramped up into tight white ridges and his hands clenched. Suddenly his restraint collapsed. He bent loosely forward and a staccato, rasping cough broke from him, shaking his slight body mercilessly. He remained bent over until the paroxysm passed. When he straightened, all of the truculence seemed gone from him. He looked sick, beaten.

"I guess that's your answer, Cammomile," he said quietly. "The doc at Blue Water told me last year I wouldn't have too long if I kept to the saddle. But how the hell can a man run a ranch if he doesn't pound leather? I was drunk one night and heard Leighton and Art Camp talking. I heard too much. So either I came in with them, or Camp would finish me. I got to thinking about Sis. The French Heel hasn't made us beans and bacon these last two years. If I went out sudden, she'd have nothing but a hunk of grass and a few cows.

But if I threw in with Leighton's plans, she'd have my cut—a quarter of the take, after Moffet had got his out."

"You're a damned fool," Clint said bluntly. "A cowman belongs in the saddle, but a sick man belongs in bed. You're more use to Anne alive than you'd ever be dead. And you've missed the best side of this deal. That hunk of grass and those cows on the French Heel would be worth money the minute the railroad came in—even if the Pacific and Colorado River *stole* the land they put their roadbed on. Good market or bad, any ranch can squeeze by if it's got a railroad in its front yard. And the company intends to pay for its right-of-way—and pay so well that Leighton and Camp and Moffet figured the whole take was worth gambling for. Even if the slices do run smaller with every rancher getting his fair share, they'd be enough to tide each of us over this bad season. And at the end, you'd still have your land."

French scuffed the sod with the toe of his boot. A guilty, grudging relief was in his eyes. "I reckon Anne has got a better head than me," he admitted finally. "I roweled her pretty hard for taking up with a Texas tramp when she and Eb Choate backed you up. Maybe I should have told her about the doc in Blue Water and what's been making me ride a tight circle this past year. Maybe I should have uncovered Leighton's game and let her help me figure a sharp way around it."

Cammomile said nothing. There was a strong pride in Buddy French, and he was making heavy going of this self-recrimination. It was best to let him fight on through it without interference. Suddenly the guilt eased in he youngster's eyes and he looked direcly at Clint.

"Cammomile, if I was to fork my bronc and get on into Blue Water—if I was to get hold of this Jonas Harrison and maybe even get him to make us an offer of so much a mile for a right-of-way, and if I was to get Harrison and the sheriff into Blue Water around noon, say—what do you figure you'd do, meantime?"

"Circle the valley," Clint said flatly. "Get Thorpe and Mrs. O'Connell and Tom McGinley and the rest into town so they'd be there to talk business with Harrison when you brought him in."

"That's all?" French asked flatly. "That's all you'd want?"

Clint nodded.

"You don't fool me," French said with wry humor. "You wouldn't let me head for town because you'd rather handle Leighton yourself. And that's why I'm not asking to go. But I want a part of the fireworks, if there are any. You wait for me, Texas. . . ." And grinning, French moved up into the rocks. He reappeared in a moment, mounted, and reined off at an angle which would cut the trail below in the direction of Blue Water. Clint watched him go, then mounted himself. Buddy French was, he thought, full of sand, in his own way. He knew his own nature and the touchiness of his nerves. He knew his lack of endurance and his insecure control of himself. He had wanted desperately to ride toward Cabezon and be a part of an open action which would exonerate him completely in the eyes of his sister and his friends. But he believed Clint could do this work better than he, so he had deliberately chosen the routine errand involved in the ride into Blue Water. The job of dealing with Leighton and the remains of his syndicate would be Clint's.

CHAPTER NINE

Unfinished Business—with Bullets!

CAMMOMILE had lied to young French. He had no intention of circling the valley. If the other ranchers were not in town they could be sent for when Jonas Harrison arrived with his offer from the railroad. There was unfinished business in Cabezon. In the conversation between French and Leighton which Clint had overheard back of the Wagon Wheel,

What a Catch!
Professional
BLADES
FOR THE
Best Shave Ever
PROFESSIONAL BLADE CO. 32 GREEN STREET NEWARK 3, N. J.
Would your piscatorial friends believe this story even if it could happen to you? But tell your friends about the smoother, cleaner shaves you get from precision-made, rust-resistant PROFESSIONAL Blades and they will agree: "What a catch!"
PROFESSIONAL
PROFESSIONAL
5 for 25¢

French had said that Camp had been the one who tracked down Luke O'Connell and killed him. Well, Camp was out of it now, but Amos Leighton and Moffett would have to be held to answer. Clint wanted that, and he rode rapidly toward town.

The main street of Cabezon was dustless and quiet when he rode into it about mid-morning. He swung down in front of the Wagon Wheel. A door opened across from him, and glancing over he saw Eb Choate standing in the doorway of the *Courier*. The old newsman stared at him curiously but gave no sign of recognition. Directly Choate turned back into his office. Clint caught a glimpse of movement there and judged that Anne French was probably in the newspaper office. Clint did not wait to see. Batting the doors to the Wagon Wheel open, he stepped quickly inside.

Two or three customers were lined up. One of these was deep in talk with Amos Leighton at the foot of the bar. Ben Moffett sat idly riffling a pack of cards at a table. Cammomile walked rapidly down the room. As he passed the chance customers, he spoke quietly to each.

"Get out!" he said. "Private business."

Each of the townsmen glanced at him with quick uneasiness and began moving toward the door. Leighton broke off his conversation with the last of these and watched Clint's approach with immobile features.

"I want a talk with you, Leighton," Clint said casually.

The big man moved lazily. "Didn't expect you so early, Cammomile," he said easily.

"No," Clint agreed. "And you didn't expect me later, either. But I'm here."

"You saw Art Camp?" Leighton asked.

Clint nodded, and Leighton's eyes hardened. "Then you want to finish up the business he started?"

Clint nodded again.

Moffett stood up unhurriedly. "A barroom is no place for gentlemen with business," he suggested with a mocking formality. "I think we'd better use a back room, Amos."

Leighton gave ground, turned, and walked toward a rear door. Clint followed, watching the man ahead of him narrowly. Moffett fell in behind. It was Cammomile's mistake that he discounted the slight, stoop-shouldered owner of the bank. As Clint passed through the rear door in Leighton's tracks, Moffett jammed a gun against his spine.

"Maybe Camp was careless," he said softly. "And maybe Buddy French didn't look in the right direction at the right time, Cammomile. Well, Amos and I are not careless—we can't afford to be. Easy, now!"

Moffett kicked the door to the outer room closed with his heel. Leighton turned and snaked Clint's gun from his belt. He lifted the piece, earing the hammer back.

"Watch the door, Ben," he said curtly. "We'll get this over with and then light a shuck out of here. This son wouldn't have come back like this unless he'd broken Camp and gotten the whole story. French is likely dead, too."

Moffett swore swiftly. "Hold it, Amos!" he snapped. "Don't let this Texan bush you. Hell, man, we're a long ways from being whipped! Look, we've got the French place sewed up tight. And if that pasty-faced kid's dead, so much the better. We've still got his signature on the deed to his place, and with him out of the way there'll be one less cut—two, if Camp's finished, too!"

Leighton let the hammer of the gun in his hand fall back.

"We've got McGinley on the line, and old Thorpe'll sign quick enough if we show him the names of the others. That leaves only—"

Moffett nodded unhurriedly. "That's right, Amos. That leaves only the Shoulder-Blade and the O'Connell place. Cammomile, here, has got title to one, and an option on the other. We've got the valley, once we've got his signature. . . ."

Leighton let out a long, slow breath. "Then I reckon we'll get that—right now!"

The big man stepped forward. At the same instant, Moffett darted in from behind. He caught Clint's elbows, dragged them back, and crossed Clint's arms in the small of his back in one sudden, savage motion. Promptly, Leighton struck with the sight-ridged muzzle of his gun.

Cammomile's knees buckled. Blood ran down over one eye from a cut in his hair line. He caught himself, straightened, and tried to twist himself free. Coolly, methodically, Leighton struck again. They were not merciless blows. They were carefully weighed and timed to punish, not to stun. Leighton struck again. The room was a rocking, roaring place shot with pain. Through it Clint heard Leighton's dead, impersonal voice.

"Want a face left, Cammomile? Want to be able to walk out of here with eyes in your head? Want your skull all in one piece? If you do, you'd better start talking while you can still hold a pen!"

Another blow landed. Clint became sick. He swore silently at his flinching nerves. He knew that if he gave in—if he signed the deed and the transfer of option these two wanted—the only way he'd leave the back of the Wagon Wheel was after dark, wrapped in a blanket.

There was a period in which his mind would not function beyond an awareness that Leighton was methodically beating his head to a pulp. Once he heard Moffett warn sharply: "Go easy, Amos! You'll kill him!"

Leighton laughed shortly. "A Texan don't die that easy!"

THESE vaguely heard words percolated through the agony in his head. They gathered together and a plan vaguely formed. When the next blow fell, Cammomile released every tension, every control and resistance in his body. His joints loosened completely. He sagged so swiftly that Moffett could not support him and his body hit the floor.

"Damn it, I told you to go light!" Moffett snarled.

Leighton prodded Clint with his toe. "He's just being stubborn," he growled defensively. "Here, I'll watch the saloon door. Fetch a bucket of water from the well out back. . . ."

The outer door opened and closed swiftly. In a moment Moffett was back, grunting a little under his burden. There was another movement and a cascade of stabbing, agonizing cold flooded Clint's shoulders and his battered head. He steeled himself to make no betraying movement.

Moffett dropped to his knees and thrust a hand under Clint's jacket.

"I think he's done," Moffett breathed.

At that instant, Clint moved. Clamping his elbow down, he imprisoned Moffett's reaching hand. Rolling hard toward the banker, he bent Moffett's arm at an unnatural angle. Bone snapped with audible brittleness. Moffett cried out with the violent pain. Leighton grunted and started to regain his feet. Clint twisted on the floor and lashed out with his feet. His paired heels caught Leighton solidly on one shin and the man went down. The gun he had been using as a club struck the floor a scant foot from Clint's face.

Using his balled fist for a hammer, Cammomile struck savagely downward across Leighton's hand as the promoter reached for the weapon. Leighton grunted, and Clint's own fingers caught up the gun. Still moaning, Moffett lumbered forward, clumsily swinging a chair with his left hand. Unable to duck, Clint fired upward under his own arm. Moffett staggered back against the door leading into the main room of the Wagon Wheel. The door flew open and Moffett's body spilled loosely half through it, almost at the feet of a small party which had apparently come running down through the saloon from the street.

Clint saw only one face that he recognized. Anne French stood in the opening, a look of horror in her eyes. Clint rolled. He had forgotten Amos Leighton for an instant in the diversion Moffett had caused. Now, as Clint rolled, Leighton drove a shot into his body.

Clint felt the shock dully. One side of his body seemed suddenly paralyzed. With a prodigious effort, he reached across with his right hand to lift the gun hanging from the limp fingers of his left. Leighton, backed against the wall and shaken with a final fury, was firing steadily. Splinters from the floor stung Clint's battered face. Another slug smashed into the dragging calf of his right leg.

But Clint felt strangely divorced from these things. He seemed unaware that he was lying on the floor, a bloody wreck, while Leighton tried to shoot him to doll-rags. One thing only was in his mind. The gun in his hand was the heaviest he had ever tried to lift. It came up slowly. He saw Leighton's flushed, wild face in the wavering notch of the sight. He cramped slow and reluctant forearm muscles. The gun in front of him suddenly jumped. He did not think the shot made any noise. That, in itself, was strange, for he saw Leighton's face disappear and he felt the shaking impact as the big man's body hit the floor.

Anne French was the first figure from the outer room through the door. She fell to her knees beside Clint, lifting his head.

Later on, she had him moved from the Wagon Wheel to the *Courier* office when the doctor was through. Clint tried a time or two to talk to her but she would not let him. She was watching with a peculiar, speculative light in her eyes, refusing even to let Eb Choate in to see him. Then Lee French rode into town with Sheriff Bent and the Railroad man.

Anne let Lee into the office, but they talked near the door where Clint could not hear them. The girl kept glancing at Clint, but now the speculation in her eyes seem to have changed to something else. Finally young French crossed to Clint and looked down at him.

"I should have known better than to trust a Texan," he said. "Cheated me twice in one day, by hell." French laughed then. "I never figured I could hang onto Sis forever, but I sure wanted a crack at Leighton." French broke off again, his friendliness evident. "Got to go hunt up the doc, now, Cammomile. But I'll be seeing you some, I reckon. Sis says we'll share the same room out at the French Heel till you're on your feet again. Hope it don't take me forever to get off my back, myself. I figure it'll be a two-man job, running the Shoulder-Blade and the French Heel."

Anne crossed the room and gently pushed her brother away. He went out onto the street.

"You made the doc sore," Clint told her.

"You don't think I was going to let an old fumble-thumb mess up a face I'm going to have to look at a long time, do you?" Anne answered crisply. "Now get some rest. I've sent for a buckboard."

There were some things Clint wanted to say. However, they would wait. Just now the weariness he had been fighting seemed welcome. It was time for rest. And afterward—well he had always wanted this place in the valley. He had it, now. . . . And maybe, in time, he would have a bride for it.

THE END

LAW OF THE DESERT-BORN

By
LOUIS L'AMOUR

SHAD MARONE crawled out of the water swearing, and slid into the mesquite. Suddenly, for the first time since the chase began, he was mad. He was mad clear through. "The hell with it!" He got to his feet, his eyes blazing. "I've run far enough! If they cross Black River, they're askin' for it!"

For three days he had been on the dodge, using every strategem known to men of the desert, but they clung to him like leeches. That was what came of killing a sheriff's brother, and the fact that he killed in self-defense wasn't going to help a bit. Especially when the killer was Shad Marone.

That was what you could expect when you were the last man of the losing side in a cattle war. All his friends were gone now but Madge.

The best people of Puerto de Luna hadn't been the toughest in this scrap, and they had lost. And Shad Marone, who had been one of the toughest, had lost with them. His guns hadn't been enough to outweigh those of the other faction.

Of course, he admitted to himself, those on his side hadn't been angels. He'd branded a few head of calves himself from time to time, and when cash was short he had often run a few steers over the border. But hadn't they all?

Truman and Dykes had been good men, but Dykes had been killed at the start, and Truman had fought like a gentleman, and that wasn't any way to win in the Black River country.

Since then, there had been few peaceful days for Shad Marone.

After they'd elected Clyde Bowman sheriff, he knew they were out to get him. Bowman hated him, and Bowman had been one of the worst of them in the cattle war.

The trouble was, Shad was a gun fighter and they all knew it. Bowman was fast with a gun, and in a fight could hold his own. Also, he was smart enough to leave Shad Marone strictly alone. So they just waited, watched, and planned.

Shad had taken their dislike as a matter of course. It took tough men to settle a tough country, and if they started shooting, somebody got hurt. Well, he wasn't getting hurt. There had been too much shooting to suit him.

He wanted to leave Puerto de Luna, but Madge was still living on the old place, and he didn't want to leave her there alone. So he stayed on, knowing it couldn't last.

Then Jud Bowman rode into town. Shad was thoughtful when he heard that. Jud was notoriously quarrelsome, and was said to have twelve notches on his gun. Shad had a feeling that Jud hadn't come to Puerto de Luna by accident.

Jud hadn't been in town two days before the grapevine had the story that if Clyde and Lopez were afraid to run Marone out of town, he wasn't.

Jud Bowman might have done it too, if it hadn't been for Tips. Tips Hogan had been tending bar in Puerto de Luna for a long time. He'd come over the trail as wagon boss for Shad's old man, something everyone had forgotten but Shad and Tips himself.

Tips saw the gun in Bowman's lap, and he gave Marone a warning. It was just a word, through unmoving lips, while he mopped the bar.

After a moment, Shad turned, his glass in his left hand, and he saw the way Bowman was sitting, and how the table top would conceal a gun in his lap. Even then, when he knew they had set things up to kill him, he hadn't wanted trouble. He decided to get out while the getting was good. Then he saw Slade near the door and Henderson across the room.

He was boxed. They weren't gambling this time. Tips Hogan knew what was coming, and he was working his way down the bar.

Marone took it easy. He knew it was coming, and it wasn't a new thing. That was his biggest advantage, he thought. He had been in more tights than any of them. He didn't want any more trouble, but if he got out of this it would be right behind a sixgun. The back door was barred and the window closed.

Jud Bowman looked up suddenly. He had a great shock of blonde, coarse hair, and under bushy brows his eyes glinted. "What's this about you threatenin' to kill me, Marone?"

In that rock-bound desert hideaway, Shad Marone grimly awaited the last of the eight-man posse. . . . For he knew he could never shake off the tough and tireless Lopez—this side of hell!

So that was their excuse. He had not threatened Bowman, scarcely knew him, in fact, but this was the way to put him in wrong, to give them the plea of self-defense.

He let his eyes turn to Bowman, saw the tensity in the man's face. A denial, and there would be shooting. Jud's right hand finger tips rested on the table's edge. He had only to drop a hand and fire.

"Huh?" Shad said stupidly, as though startled from a day dream. He took a step toward the table, his face puzzled. "Wha'd you say? I didn't get it."

They had planned it all very carefully. Marone would deny, Bowman would claim he'd been called a liar, there would be a killing. They were tense, all three of them set to draw.

"Huh?" Shad repeated, blankly.

They were caught flat-footed. After all, you couldn't shoot a man in cold blood. You couldn't shoot a man who was half asleep. Most of the men in the saloon were against Marone, but they would never stand for murder.

They were poised for action, and nothing happened. Shad blinked at them. "Sorry," he said, "I must've been dreamin'. I didn't hear you."

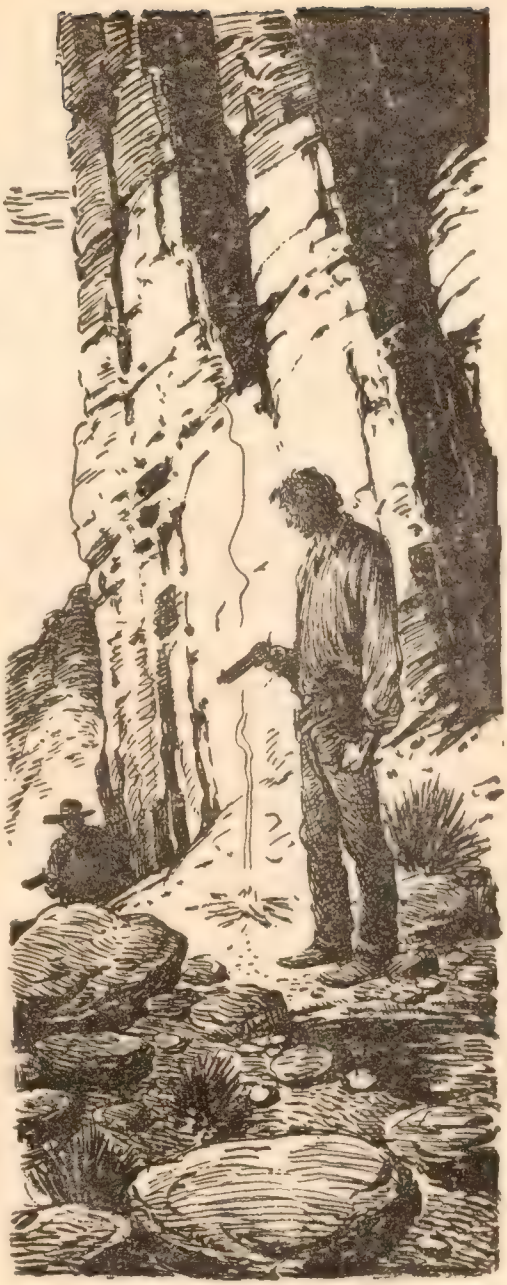
BOWMAN glanced around uncertainly wetting his lips with his tongue. "I said I heard you threatened to kill me," he repeated. It sounded lame, and he knew it, but Shad's response had been unexpected. What happened then was even more unexpected.

Marone's left hand shot out and before anyone could move, the table was spun from in front of Bowman. Everyone saw the naked gun lying in his lap.

Every man in the saloon knew that Jud Bowman, for all his reputation, had been afraid to shoot it out with an even break. It would have been murder.

Taken by surprise, Bowman blinked foolishly. Then his wits came back. Blood rushed to his face. He grabbed the gun. "Why, you. . . !"

Then Shad Marone shot him. Shad shot him through the belly, and before the other two could act, he wheeled, not toward the door, but to the closed window. He battered it with his shoulder and went right on through. Outside, he hit the ground on his hands, but came up in a lunging run. Then he was in the saddle and on his way.



Shad Marone froze, a gun in hand.

There were men in the saloon who would

tell the truth—two at least, although neither had much use for him. But Marone knew that with Clyde Bowman as sheriff he would never be brought to trial. He would be killed "evading arrest."

For three days he fled, and during that time they were never more than an hour behind him. Then, at Forked Tree, they closed in. He got away, but they clipped his horse. The roan stayed on his feet, giving all he had, as horses always had given for Shad Marone, and then died on the river bank, still trying with his last breath.

Marone took time to cache his saddle and bridle, then started on afoot. He made the river, and they thought that would stop him, for he couldn't swim a stroke. But he found a drift log, and with his guns riding high, he shoved off. Using the current and his own kicking, he got to the other bank, considerably downstream.

The thing that bothered him was the way they clung to his trail. Bowman wasn't the man to follow as little trail as he left. Yet the man hung to him like an Apache.

Apache!

Why hadn't he thought of that? It would be Lopez, following that trail, not Bowman. Bowman was a bulldog, but Lopez was wily as a fox and bloodthirsty as a weasel.

Shad got to his feet and shook the water from him like a dog. He was a big, rawboned, sun-browned man. His shirt was half torn away, and a bandolier of cartridges was slung across his shoulder and chest. His sixgun was on his hip, his rifle in his hand.

He poured the water out of his boots. Well, he was through playing now. If they wanted a trail, he'd see that they got one.

Lopez was the one who worried him. He could shake the others, but Lopez was one of the men who had built this country. He was ugly, he killed freely and often, he was absolutely ruthless, but he had nerve. You had to hand it to him. The man wasn't honest, and he was too quick to kill, but it had taken men like him to tame this wild, lonely land. It was a land that didn't tame easy.

Well, what they'd get now would be death for them all. Even Lopez. This was something he'd been saving.

Grimly he turned up the steep, little used path from the river. They thought they had him at the river. And they would think they had him again at the lava beds.

Waterless, treeless and desolate, the lava beds were believed to harbor no life of any kind. Only sand, and great, jagged rocks—rocks shaped like flame—grotesque, barren, awful. More than seventy miles long, never less than thirty miles wide, and so rough a pair of shoes wouldn't last five miles and footing next to impossible for horses.

On the edge of the lava, Shad Marone sat down and pulled off his boots. Tying their strings, he hung them to his belt. Then he pulled out a pair of moccasins he always carried, and slipped them on. Pliable and easy on his feet, they would give to the rough rock, and would last many times as long in this terrain as boots. He got up and walked into the lava beds.

The bare lava caught the fierce heat and threw it back in his face. A trickle of sweat started down his cheek. He knew the desert, knew how to live in the heat, and he did not try to hurry. That would be fatal. Far ahead of him was a massive tower of rock, jutting up like a church steeple from a tiny village. He headed that way, walking steadily. He made no attempt to cover his trail, no attempt to lose his pursuers. He knew where he was going.

An hour passed, and then another. It was slow going. The rock tower had come abreast of him and then fallen behind. Once he saw the trail of some tiny creature, perhaps a horned frog.

Once, when he climbed a steep declivity, he glanced back. They were still coming. They hadn't quit.

Lopez: That was like Lopez. He wouldn't quit. Shad smiled then, but his eyes were without humor. All right, they wanted to kill him bad enough to try the lava beds. They would have to learn the hard way—learn when they could never profit from the lesson.

HE KEPT working north, using the shade carefully. There was little of it, only here and there in the lee of a rock. But each time he stopped, he cooled off a little. So far he hadn't taken a drink.

After the third hour he washed his lips and rinsed his mouth. Twice, after that, he took only a spoonful of water and rinsed his mouth before swallowing.

Occasionally he stopped and looked around to get his bearings. He smiled grimly when he thought of Bowman. The sheriff was a heavy man. Davis would be there, too. Lopez was lean and wiry. He would last. He would be hard to kill.

By his last count there were eight left. Four had turned back at the lava beds. He gained a little.

At three in the afternoon he finally stopped. It was a nice piece of shade, and would grow better as the hours went on. The ground was low, and in one corner there was a pocket. He dug with his hands until the ground became damp. Then he lay back on the sand and went to sleep.

He wasn't worried. Too many years he had been awakening at the hour he wished, his senses alert to danger. He was an hour ahead

of them, at least. He would need this rest he was going to get. What lay ahead would take everything he had. He knew that.

Their feet would be punishing them cruelly now. Three of them still had their horses, leading them.

He rested his full hour, then got up. He had cut it very thin. Through a space in the rocks he could see them, not three hundred yards away. Lopez, as he had suspected, was in the lead. How easy to pick them off now! But no, he would not kill again. Let their own anxiety to kill him kill them.

Within a hundred yards he had put two jumbled piles of boulders between himself and his pursuers. A little farther then, and he stopped.

Before him was a steep slide of shale, near the edge of a great basin. Standing where he did, he could see far away in the distance, a purple haze over the mountains. Between there was nothing but a great white expanse, shimmering with heat.

He slid down the shale and brought up at the bottom. He was now, he knew, seventy feet below sea level. He started away, and at every step dry, powdery dust lifted in clouds. It caked in his nostrils, filmed his eyelashes, and covered his clothes with whitish, alkaline dust. Far across the Sink, and scarcely discernible from the crest behind him, was the Window in the Rock. He headed for it, walking steadily. It was ten miles if you walked straight across.

"So far that Navajo was right," Shad told himself. "An' he said to make it before dark . . . or else!"

Shad Marone's lips were dry and cracked. After a mile he stopped, tilting his canteen until he could get his finger into the water, then carefully moistened his lips. Just a drop then, inside his mouth.

All these men were desertwise. None of them, excepting perhaps Lopez, would know about the Sink. They would need water. They would have to know where to find it. By day they could follow his trail, but after darkness fell . . . ?

And then, the Navajo had said, the wind would begin to blow. Shad looked at the dry, powdery stuff under him. He could imagine what a smothering, stifling horror this would be if the wind blew. Then, no man could live.

Heat waves danced a queer rigadoon across the lower sky, and heat lifted, beating against his face from the hot white dust beneath his feet. Always it was over a man's shoe tops, sometimes almost knee deep. Far away the mountains were a purple line that seemed to waver vaguely in the afternoon sun. He walked on, heading by instinct rather than sight for the Window.

Dust arose in a slow, choking cloud. It came up from his feet in little puffs, like white smoke. He stumbled, then got his feet right, and kept on. Walking in this was like dragging yourself through heavy mud. The dust pulled at his feet. His pace was slow.

Thirst gathered in his throat, and his mouth seemed filled with something thick and clotted. His tongue was swollen, his lips cracked and swollen. He could not seem to swallow.

He could not make three miles an hour. Darkness would reach him before he made the other side. But he would be close. Close enough. Luckily, at this season, the light stayed long in the sky.

After a long time, he stopped and looked back. Yes, they were coming. But there was not one dust cloud. There were several. Through red-rimmed, sun-squinted eyes, he watched. They were straggling. Every straggler would die. He knew that. Well, they had asked for it.

Dust covered his clothing, and only his gun he kept clean. Every half hour he stopped and wiped it as clean as he could. Twice he pulled a knotted string through the barrel.

Finally he used the last of his water. Every half hour he had been wetting his lips. He did not throw the canteen away, but slung it back upon his hip. He would need it, later, when he got to the Nest. His feet felt very heavy, his legs seemed to belong to an automaton. Head down, he slogged wearily on. In an hour he made two miles.

THERE is a time when human nature seems able to stand no more. There is a time when every iota of strength seems burned away. This was the fourth day of the chase. Four days without a hot meal, four days of riding, walking, running. Now this. He had only to stop, they would come up with him, and it would be over.

The thought of how easy it would be to quit came to him. He considered the thought. But he did not consider quitting. He could no more have stopped than a bee could stop making honey. Life was ahead, and he had to live. It was a matter only of survival now. The man with the greatest urge to live would be the one to survive.

BUY VICTORY BONDS!

Those men behind him were going to die. They were going to die for three reasons. First, he alone knew where there was water, and at the right time he would lose them.

Second, he was in the lead, and after dark they would have no trail, and if they lived through the night there would be no trail left in the morning.

Third, at night, at this season, the wind always blew, and their eyes and mouths and ears would fill with soft, white filmy dust, and if they lay down, they would be buried by the sifting, swirling dust.

They would die then, every manjack of them.

They had it coming. Bowman deserved it, so did Davis and Gardner. Lopez most of all. They were all there, he had seen them. Lopez was a killer. The man's father had been Spanish and Irish, his mother an Apache.

Without Lopez he would have shaken them off long ago. Shad Marone tried to laugh, but the sound was only a choking grunt. Well, they had followed Lopez to their death, all of them. Aside from Lopez, they were weak sisters.

He looked back again. He was gaining on them now. The first dust cloud was farther behind, and the distance between the others was growing wider. It was a shame Lopez had to die, at that. The man was tough and had plenty of trail savvy.

Shad Marone moved on. From somewhere within him he called forth a new burst of strength. His eyes watched the sun. While there was light, they had a chance. What would they think in Puerto de Luna when eight men did not come back?

Marone looked at the sun, and it was low, scarcely above the purple mountains. They seemed close now. He lengthened his stride again. The Navajo had told him how his people once had been pursued by Apaches, and had led the whole Apache war party into the Sink. There they had been caught by darkness, and none were ever seen again according to the Indian's story.

Shad stumbled then, and fell. Dust lifted thickly about him, clogging his nostrils. Slowly, like a groggy fighter, he got his knees under him and using his rifle for a staff, pushed himself to his feet.

He started on, driven by some blind, brute desire for life. When he fell again he could feel rocks under his hands. He pulled himself up.

He climbed the steep, winding path toward the Window in the Rock. Below the far corner of the Window was the Nest. And in the Nest there was water. Or so the Navajo had told him.

When he was halfway up the trail he turned and looked back over the Sink. Far away, he could see the dust clouds. Four of them. One larger than the others. Probably there were two men together.

"Still coming," he muttered grimly, "and Lopez leading them!"

Lopez, damn his soul!

The little devil had guts, though; you had to give him that. Suddenly, Marone found himself almost wishing Lopez would win through. The man was like a wolf. A killer wolf. But he had guts. And it wasn't just the honest men who had built up this country to what it was today.

Maybe, without the killers and rustlers and badmen, the West would never have been won so soon. Shad Marone remembered some of them: Wild, dangerous men, who went into country where nobody else dared venture. They killed and robbed to live, but they stayed there.

It took iron men for that: Men like Lopez, who was a mongrel of the Santa Fe Trail. Lopez had drunk water from a buffalo track many a time. *Well, so have I,* Shad told himself.

Shad Marone took out his six-shooter and wiped it free of dust. Only then did he start up the trail.

He found the Nest, a hollow among the rocks, sheltered from the wind. The Window loomed above him now, immense, gigantic. Shad stumbled, running, into the Nest. He dropped his rifle and lunged for the water hole, throwing himself on the ground to drink. Then he stared, unbelieving.

Empty!

The earth was dry and parched where the water had been, but only cracked earth remained.

HE COULDN'T believe it. It couldn't be! It couldn't . . . ! Marone came to his feet, glaring wildly about. His eyes were red-rimmed, his face heat-flushed above the black whiskers now filmed with gray dust.

He tried to laugh. Lopez dying down below there, he dying up here! The hard men of the West, the tough men! He sneered at himself. Both of them now would die, he at the waterhole, Lopez down there in the cloying, clogging dust!

He shook his head. Through the flame-sheathed torment of his brain there came a cool ray of sanity.

There had been water here. The Indian had been right. The cracked earth showed that. But where?

Perhaps a dry season. . . . But no; it had not been a dry season. Certainly no dryer than any other year at this time.

He stared across the place where the pool had been. Rocks, and a few rock cedar, and some heaped up rocks from a small slide. He

stumbled across and began clawing at the rocks, pulling, tearing. Suddenly a trickle of water burst through! He got hold of one big rock and in a mad frenzy, tore it from its place. The water shot through then, so suddenly he was knocked to his knees.

He scrambled out of the depression, splashing in the water. Then, lying on his face, he drank, long and greedily.

Finally he rolled away and lay still, panting. Dimly he was conscious of the wind blowing. He crawled to the water again and bathed his face, washing away the dirt and grime. Then, careful as always, he filled his canteen from the fresh water bubbling up from the spring.

If he only had some coffee. . . . But he'd left his food in his saddlebags.

Well, Madge would be all right now. He could go back to her. After this, they wouldn't bother him. He would take her away. They would go to the Blue Mountains in Oregon. He had always liked that country.

The wind was blowing more heavily now, and he could smell the dust. That Navajo hadn't lied. It would be hell down in the Sink. He was above it now, and almost a mile away.

He stared down into the darkness, wondering how far Lopez had been able to get. The others didn't matter; they were weak sisters, who lived on the strength of better men. If they didn't die there they would die elsewhere, and the West could spare them. He got to his feet.

Lopez would hate to die. The ranch he had built so carefully in a piece of the wildest, roughest country was going good. It took a man with guts to settle where he had and make it pay. Shad Marone rubbed the stubble on his jaw. "That last thirty head of his cows I rustled for him brought the best price I ever got!" he remembered thoughtfully. "Too bad there ain't more like him!"

Well, after this night there would be one less. There wouldn't be anything to guide Lopez down there now. A man caught in a thick whirlpool of dust would have no landmarks; there would be nothing to get him out except blind instinct. The Navajos had been clever, leading the Apaches into a trap like that. Odd, that Lopez' mother had been an Apache, too.

Just the same, Marone thought, he had nerve. He'd shot his way up from the bottom until he had one of the best ranches.

Shad Marone began to pick up some dead cedar. He gathered some needles for kindling, and in a few minutes had a fire going.

Marone took another drink. Somehow, he felt restless. He got up and walked to the edge of the Nest. How far had Lopez come? Suppose . . . Marone gripped his pistol.

Suddenly, he started down the mountain. "The hell with it!" he muttered.

A stone rattled.

Shad Marone froze, gun in hand.

Lopez, a gray shadow, weaving in the vague light from the cliff, had a gun in his hand. For a full minute they stared at each other.

Marone spoke first. "Looks like a dead heat," he said.

Lopez said, "How'd you know about that waterhole?"

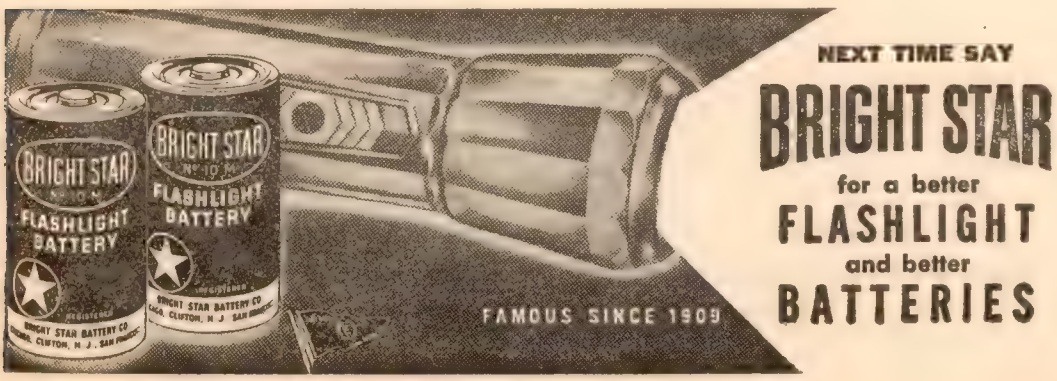
"Navajo told me," Shad replied, watching Lopez like a cat. "You don't look so bad," he added. "Have a full canteen?"

"No. I'd have been a goner. But my mother was an Apache. A bunch of them got caught in the Sink once. That never happened twice to no Apache. They found this waterhole then, and one down below. I made the one below, an' then I was finished. She was a dry hole. But then water began to run in from a crack in the rock."

"Yeah?" Marone looked at him again. "You got any coffee?"

"Sure."

"Well," Shad holstered his gun, "I've got a fire."



• • • GUN-CUB OF

WALT COBURN

Pete Isom was counting on the lure of Old Ike's glittering, buried booty to toll those four murder-mad range pirates back to the Isom Figure 8, behind the Red Wall. . . . But before he joined the occupant of that lonely grave upon the hill, he would show them the way to the treasure—and the quickest route to hell—with a pair of flaming, blue-steel divining rods!

OUTLAW RANCH

They came from the direction of the Isom Ranch, and they were traveling fast.

Powerful Novel of a Powdersmoke Prodigal

CHAPTER ONE

Dangerous Guests

THERE were four renegades staying at the Hank Isom ranch behind the Red Wall. They had ridden in through the Hole-in-the-Wall with a little bunch of stolen horses a couple of weeks ago and had stayed on to take a rest cure from what they bragged loudly and toughly was an outlaw life. They paid for their keep with a two-bit bunch of stolen horses which they had thrown into Hank Isom's pasture. Their bragging whiskey talk went on and on. Sheep-camp robbers, Hank Isom branded and earmarked his unwelcome visitors. But he did not know how to get rid of them.

Hank Isom was glad for one thing. His son, Pete, wasn't here. He had sent the seventeen-year-old Pete to rep with the general round-up over on Powder River. There were enough stray cattle in the Isom Figure 8 iron to pay sending out a cowboy to represent the brand. But repping made young Pete feel a cowhand's importance. And mainly it got Pete out from underfoot when drifting outlaws came through The Hole.

Running a little bunch of Figure 8 cattle gave the ranch a legal excuse for existing. Hank Isom's Ranch behind the Red Wall in Wyoming was an outlaw way station and blind

post office, and running it as such, Hank Isom made money. The Curry Gang and the Wild Bunch and the Hole-in-the-Wall Gang paid big money for a change of fresh horses and a safe hideout where they could grab a night's safe sleep. And when the bloodhounds of John Law sniffed along the cold trail of the outlaw wolf pack and got as far as the Isom place, Hank could show them his little bunch of Figure 8 cattle and horses, and his motherless son, Pete, who would be working with a string of broncs or branding out a few calves following Figure 8 cows. And the most suspicious range detective on earth could take one look at young Pete Isom's bald-faced kid grin and his uncut shock of straw-colored hair and see the sunny sparkle in Pete's sky-blue eyes and be firmly convinced that Pete Isom was as innocent as a baby. The Figure 8 brand was registered in Pete Isom's name.

"When Pete comes of age," Hank Isom would promise himself, "I'll sell this place and move out from behind the Red Wall. Then I'll actually run an honest cow outfit."

Hank Isom had saved the money paid him by drifting outlaws whom he had hidden out here. And because he did not believe in banks, Hank had the money cached away. There was no telling how much real money was in Hank Isom's cache, but the rumor along the Outlaw Trail had it tallied up to make Hank a rich man.

It wasn't very often that Hank Isom felt uneasy about being robbed. The Outlaw Trail had its own peculiar code of honor. The Law had never been able to pry anything in the way of information or help from Hank Isom. Men who rode through the Hole in the Red Wall would not be foolhardy enough to harm a man whose good grub took the wrinkles out of their lean empty bellies. Outlaws on the dodge, hard-pressed by a sheriff's posse, could bank on getting a stout grain-fed fresh horse at the Hank Isom ranch. Some lone outlaw, drifting back to contact his scattered gang, would pick up whatever information he might need at Hank Isom's blind postoffice. . . . Those outlaws depended on Hank Isom.

But the four men who were camped here now were a different breed. They were more coyote than wolf, and therefore dangerous.

The leader was a big, six-foot, rawboned man with reddish hair and a hawk-beaked nose. He had a long, underslung jaw covered with a mangy looking reddish beard. He said his name was Sanderson, but the others all called him Swede.

The one they called Baldy was short and burly. He had a splayed nose and crooked yellowish teeth and he was as bald as a white rock. His eyes were beady and black. The disease that had left him bald had robbed him of his eyebrows and his wicked eyes glittered nakedly in a face covered with chapped red skin. His heavy jaw was bushed with a growth of unhealthy black whiskers. Baldy had no other name.

Slim Jim Jones was tall and lean and long-legged. He had drab-colored hair and whiskers, a pair of pale gray eyes and a thin, high-bridged nose. He talked out of one corner of his thin-lipped mouth while a half-smoked cigarette hung from the other corner. He called himself a bronc stomper and wore two filled cartridge belts and two bone-handled six-shooters in holsters tied down on his slim thighs. He was not especially fast or accurate, but he spent a lot of time practicing drawing and shooting at empty bottles and tin cans.

Mex Fletcher was not a Mexican. He claimed to be part Mexican, part Injun, and the rest bad white. He had a swarthy skin deeply pitted with old pockmarks, and with his black, kinky hair and yellow eyes he had the look of a vicious animal. His nose was flat and he was thick-lipped. Silent when cold sober, a few drinks made him ugly-tempered and quarrelsome. But he was a good hand with a horse and he had the guts to back any fight talk he made with a fast six-shooter or a long-bladed dirk which he packed in a sheath.

Hank Isom made his own potent corn whiskey and it was hot as liquid fire. The oldest keg of it was still green, however, because he could not still it fast enough to take care of all his bottle and jug trade.

HANK ISOM kept a clean kitchen because he did his own cooking and washed his own dishes. He had once been a round-up cook —a good one—and he prided himself on it. Hank was never a dangerous man. He was a paunchy, moon-faced man with thinning gray hair and mild, good-natured eyes.

He liked poker, and when the company was right, Hank Isom banked a stud or draw game at his ranch. And while he said he couldn't brag about his card skill, he won enough to meet all his running expenses.

His four tough grubline-rider guests had clamored for a poker game and Hank Isom had gotten out his deck of cards and poker chips. But none of them had more than a few dollars to gamble with, so he warned them his bank had a fifty-dollar limit. And when he found out they were teamed up against him, he let them cheat him out of the fifty then pushed back his chair and said he was finished. After that he left them to poker it out among themselves, and the game broke up the first night.

They butchered a Figure 8 beef one evening without making any effort to ask Hank's permission. They hacked off ribs to roast over an open fire outside, leaving it up to Hank to finish quartering and hanging the beef before it spoiled on the ground.

They hollered continually for more booze and demanded three big meals a day and coffee simmering on the back of the kitchen stove all night.

They ran in his little remuda of good horses and took their pick, and rounded up what cattle they could gather in an hour's ride and held an impromptu jackpot roping contest. They also ran off a wild cow milking that broke one cow's leg and left several others crippled.

There was a good stock of .30-30 and .45 caliber ammunition at the ranch, kept there to supply drifting men on the dodge who had run short of cartridges. The four renegades helped themselves and held a continuous target practice, shooting at empty bottles and tin cans. Then they wanted moving targets, so they let young Pete's bunch of chickens out and when none of them could shoot the head off a running chicken they shot at the feathered part and killed off all Pete Isom's laying hens and his roosters.

They even wanted Hank Isom to run past so they could shoot off his boot heels, but he talked them out of that in his easy-going way. So they settled for a fresh jug of corn likker and a batch of doughnuts which they never ate.

Hank Isom knew, then, that they were fixing to kill him. He figured he would be getting off lucky if they shot him dead. He was scared they would torture him until he told them where he had his life's savings cached. They kept dropping crude and ugly hints, calling him "Miser Isom" and asking him how much money he had buried.

Big Swede Sanderson motioned him outside and over to the barn. The Swede had taken off his shirt and was walking around in a dirty red flannel undershirt. He leaned forward in the dusk, dropping his voice to a rasping confidential whisper.

"Them curly wolves I got fer a pack, Isom," he leered drunkenly, "is gittin' itchy and kinda outa hand. I don't know how much longer I kin hold 'em back, and I'd shore hate to watch 'em git to work on you. They want a South America stake but they're too damned lazy to hold up a train or stick up another bank. . . . They know you got it buried here. Yuh have, ain't yuh, Isom?"

"All I got of my own, Swede," said Hank Isom, "is runnin' expense money, and you pokered me outa fifty of that."

"I know you got a big cache hid, Isom. No use lyin' to me. You lead me to it now and we'll dig 'er up and the two of us will high-tail it. Set Baldy and Slim Jim and Mex ahoof so's they can't foller us. . . . I'll give you protection, even if I have to bushwhack them three ornery sons. Let's dig 'er up and pull out, Isom —me'n you."

Hank Isom shook his head stubbornly. He had never packed a gun in his life; in fact, didn't own a gun of any kind for his personal use. He had always been afraid of handling a loaded gun. Cold sweat beaded his skin, but he felt no fear of death—not if they did the job quickly.

"I can't do it, Swede. I ain't got—"

"You damn' lyin' skunk!" The big Swede's open hand slammed against Hank Isom's mouth, and it was like the slap of a grizzly.

HANK ISOM reeled backwards, lost his balance and went down. The Swede kicked him in the belly. Hank crossed both arms to protect his head and face and the big Swede kept kicking him until Hank had to grit his teeth against the pain. Then the brutal kicking stopped. Swede Sanderson stood over him, blowing hard, sweat darkening his dirty red flannel undershirt. He cursed in a rasping voice as Hank lay motionless, playing possum.

"You'll soon be wishin' to hell you'd throwed in with me, Isom, when I let 'em at you. That Mex knows tricks you never heard about. . . ."

The big Swede turned and headed back for the bunkhouse. Hank Isom got to his hands and knees and crawled off in behind a pile of cordwood. He saw the big Swede open the bunkhouse door, saw the others in the lamplight.

THE GREATEST PIPE VALUE ON THE MARKET
LHS PIPES
CERTIFIED
PUREX
at your dealer's
Vita Fused Bowl
Imported Briar
Aluminum moisture trap
Aluminum safety lock (unbreakable)
Aluminum shank lining
$3.50
Model #14—plain finish.
Dozens of handsome models, plain or antique.
Made by the makers of LHS Sterncrest Pipes, $5, $7.50, $10
I. & H. Stern, Inc., 56 Pearl St., Brooklyn 1, N.Y.

"Any luck, Swede?" he heard Slim Jim Jones ask.

"Naw. We'll have to work over the dirty son. . . ."

The bunkhouse door closed. Hank Isom lay there on the ground, bruised and sick with pain. There was the taste of blood in his mouth, warm and nauseating, and where the Swede's high boot heels had cracked a couple of his ribs pain shot through Hank Isom's chest like liquid fire. Cold sweat bathed him and waves of dizziness swept through his brain as he lay on the ground shuddering, blood trickling from his open mouth. He passed out, then came alive once more, shivering and sweating, racked with pain. He was afraid now, afraid of what the Swede and Baldy and Slim Jim and Mex were going to do to him.

It was fear, in fact, that cleared the dizziness from his brain and dried the sweat and eased something of the pain. Hank Isom had never claimed to be brave, nor had he ever pretended at toughness. He was not built to stand too much pain. He knew that if those four renegades went to work on him together he would never be able to endure the torture. He would weaken and tell them where he had his cache. Then they would dig it up and once they made sure they had found it all, they would kill him. And thus young Pete would be robbed of his chance to get out from behind The Red Wall to own his honest peaceful outfit somewhere far beyond the Outlaw Trail.

Hank Isom made no bid for bravery. He was just a fat man who was afraid of pain. And Pete was his son—all he had on this earth.

The four renegades would be a long ways gone by the time young Pete Isom could get back home from the round-up over on Powder River. They'd be scattered and a long ways gone because they were coyotes, sheep-camp robbers. . . .

While Hank Isom lay there on the ground in the black shadows behind the pile of cordwood he could hear them talking inside the bunkhouse. The bunkhouse windows were open and snatches of their whiskey talk drifted out.

". . . .and that fat son," rasped the voice of the pockmarked Mex, "will give up head like a bull calf drug to the brandin' fire. . . . Takes a man with plenty guts from bawlin' when it's a hot iron and a sharp knife. . . . Talk? Why, that pot-gutted polecat will be squawkin' like a panther by the time I git this runnin' iron hot. . . ."

There was a long moment of panic when Hank Isom thought of making a run for it. There were horses in the barn—stout, grain-fed horses that would take a man away from here fast and carry him as far as he wanted to go. . . . But they'd head him off before he got started. Hank Isom was no kind of a horse-backer. He'd been a round-up cook, and most of his riding had been on the seat of a chuck wagon. And there wasn't a horse in the barn that wouldn't pitch a few jumps, at the start.

Just outside the meat house was the high scaffold where Hank Isom hung his butchered beef to cool. Four ropes dangled, with meat hooks knotted to the ends, for hoisting the four quarters of butchered beef high off the ground to hang and cool. They dangled there like four hangman ropes in the light of the moon. . . .

The Swede had given him a brutal working over with his boots and pain racked the fat man with every cautious move he made. He gritted his teeth against it and his hands fumbled shakily as he got one of the big meat hooks off the end of the rope. He tied a slip-knot and fitted the noose down over his blood-matted head and around his neck. Then he gripped the rope with both hands and hoisted himself up onto the empty whiskey barrel he had stood on end under the cross pole of the meat scaffold. He tested the rope carefully before he kicked the empty barrel out from under his feet. . . .

CHAPTER TWO

Grim Decision

YOUNG Pete Isom was big for his seventeen years—tall and hard-muscled and rawhide tough. He had worked around broncs since he was old enough to handle a horse and had learned the hard way to be watchful and quick moving. His shoulders and chest would broaden and thicken, but he would never grow much taller than his present height of five feet ten. He sat a horse well and had a bronc rider's sense of balance and was a good roper. Pete Isom would be a top hand in any man's cow outfit. Quiet-mannered, he had been brought up in an outlaw country where a kid learns to listen, but never to talk out of turn. They called Pete Isom a good boy and that just about covered it.

A grown man in stature, Pete would always retain a lot of youth inside his heart because that is the way with most ranch-raised boys who are doing a cowhand's forty-dollar-a-month job before they are out of the eighth grade. Theirs is a boyhood that is marked by a man's tough job, and the days and years of lost play must find outlet in later years when cowboys let off steam by bucking their horses down a cowtown street, shooting off six-shooters and yipping. And until such men as Pete Isom die of old age, their hearts stay young. They are a breed apart; they understand one another and care not at all if they are misunderstood by outsiders.

So Pete Isom rode along in the sunrise watching the long shadow cast by him and his

moving horse, and the morning song of a meadow lark had its echo in young Pete's heart. The sky was blue and the sun was warm and he had a good horse between his legs.

The round-up was camped on the Middle Fork of Powder River. The outfit was laying over there a day or two to shoe horses and roundside while the wagon boss whittled out a dicker to take a trail herd on to Montana.

"It's a chance for you to ride home, Pete," said Long Tom Taylor, the wagon boss, "for a change of socks. If Hank will let you come along, I'll be proud to have you. Give you a chance to learn new country and pick up the savvy of handlin' a trail herd."

Young Pete Isom day-dreamed about it as he headed for the Isom ranch behind the Red Wall. The trail drive to Miles City was adventure. Long days riding the swing, or eating the dirt at the drag end. Dust and sun and wind and the trail herd strung out ahead for miles. . . .

"Tell that damned ol' grub-spoiler we need a cook, Pete," Long Tom said. "Do Hank good to git away. He's bin talkin' a long time about pullin' stakes, and I know a place up yonder in Montana made to order fer you'n Hank. It's at the foot of the Little Rockies, tell him. . . . Hank's the best damned round-up cook that ever upset a chuck wagon."

Pete hoped that Hank would make up his mind to go along. Young Pete knew a lot more about what went on at the Isom ranch behind the Red Wall than ever he let on. A kid with good ears and a quiet tongue can learn a lot just by pretending not to listen.

Pete knew and fully realized the risks and dangers Hank Isom faced every day and night he stayed there behind the Red Wall. Running an outlaw way station and blind post office meant living in constant dread that one of these times some law officer would catch up with Hank and send him to the pen. And a man like Hank wouldn't last long, penned up.

Pete Isom had ridden away from the round-up camp right after supper. He had taken it easy, riding most of the night and camping on water before daybreak to rest his horse a couple of hours. And he was no more than a few miles from home when he heard riders coming. They came from the direction of the Isom ranch and they were traveling fast. Pete could tell by the sounds, before ever they came into sight.

Sheer instinct prompted Pete Isom to ride off the trail and out of sight. It was something that came from long habit. In an outlaw country like this you never knew what kind of men you were apt to run into. So whenever it was possible, it was always a good idea to avoid

meeting travelers of any kind. They might be outlaws who did not want to be sighted. Or on the other hand, it might be a sheriff's posse that would stop you and ask too many questions.

So Pete Isom pulled off the trail behind the brush. And he watched the four men ride into sight and along the trail and out of sight again in the broken rough country.

FOUR strangers, all riding fresh Figure 8 horses. And they were all traveling light, without bed horses or pack outfit. They looked tough, but to Pete they seemed more coyote than wolf. Pete Isom knew that breed, and despised it. No honest cow outfit would hire that type, and even outlaw guards at places like Brown's Hole or Robbers' Roost would turn them back at the gate. And these four hard renegades were coming from the Isom ranch and appeared to be traveling ten jumps ahead of a law posse. They kept looking back across their shoulders like men on the dodge.

Pete Isom studied them, each in turn. He took in every detail of their looks, their mannerisms, their way of sitting a horse. He would recognize them if ever he cut their sign again.

The four were in an ugly temper—Pete could tell that from the way they acted.

The big sandy-haired man in the lead rode standing in his stirrups and he twisted sideways to call back to the others.

"Quit your damned bellyachin', Baldy," he snapped. "I'm gittin' sick of it."

The man behind the leader took off his hat and mopped a hairless head with a dirty red bandanna.

"You ain't no sicker than us, Swede," he retorted. "And if you'd played it the way me'n Slim Jim an' Mex wanted it, we'd a bin gone the next day after we got there and on our way to the Argentine with a stake. But you had to be the big dawg with the brass collar. I'll leave it to Slim Jim."

"Don't leave nothin' to me," called out the tall, slim rider behind the bald-headed man, "till you die. Then I'll help myself."

"The pot-gutted son," rasped the swarthy rider bringing up the rear, "cheatin' a man thataway. It's gittin' so's a man can't trust nobody."

Baldy was cursing a pair of blistered hands, his voice a dismal whine.

"I dug, by the hell, and I dug. And I hope to hell I never lift another shovel till I dig a shallow grave fer the big Swede."

They rode on out of sight and when they had gone, Pete Isom reined his horse out from behind the brush and back onto the twisting trail that led to the Isom ranch. The morning sun was warm and bright but Pete felt chilled. He did not know why.

An hour later Pete Isom rode up to the little ranch behind the Red Wall and saw the dead body of his father, Hank Isom, hanging from the meat scaffold.

The sight so stunned Pete that for a full minute he sat his horse there in the morning sunlight, hardly seeming to breathe. It was a horrible dream that could not be real, and yet he knew it was real as hell and he would come awake from the dazed shock of it directly and do something about it. Pete Isom aged years in those brief minutes. And for the first time in his life he knew what it was to hate. It was not, however, a swift, burning hatred that flared, then died down. It was more like a poison that seeped into his heart and brain and coursed through his veins. There was a taste to it, a bitter taste.

Pete Isom had never seen a hanged man before. The stunned look went slowly out of his eyes; then he turned loose his horse and went about the job he had to do. . . .

Pete Isom lowered the dead body of his father and pried loose the noose. Then he got a pick and shovel, and the grave he dug was deep. He fetched Hank Isom's tarp-covered round-up bed from the cabin and spread it in the bottom of the grave. He washed the dried, crusted blood from his father's face and head and finally lowered Hank's bulk into the grave. After that he pulled the blankets and old tarpaulin up over Hank's head and filled the excavation.

Then Pete Isom prowled around the ranch, reading the sign left behind by the four renegades. They had made a destructive but totally vain search for Hank Isom's cache. The cabin and bunkhouse were wrecked. And at the barn the mangers had been ripped out and wherever it seemed to them a likely place, they had chopped and dug with pick and shovel. But finally they had given it up as a bad job, had saddled the best horses and taken what they could carry and pulled out.

HANK ISOM had left behind him no written word of explanation. Young Pete had to read what sign was left, and tally it up. Somebody, according to the ugly, ghastly evidence that remained, had beaten up Hank Isom in an effort to make him tell where he had his money cached. And when Hank had refused to talk, they had hung him. They had then made their futile search for the cache, leaving the place in a shambles.

Four of them. Four renegades of the coyote breed. Pete was sure now these were the men he had sighted on the trail. He would recognize them if he ever cut their sign again.

Hank Isom had simply waited too long—Hank Isom, who had never harmed anybody in his life. Old Hank, round-up cook, a fat, good-natured man who had always given away more than he took. Hank Isom had never

packed a gun. Those four coyote renegades had murdered him. . . .

Pete Isom knew that he could never again call this ranch behind the Red Wall his home. He could not stand the thought of staying here, because he would never be able to wipe out the horrible picture in his mind of Hank Isom hanging from that meat scaffold.

There was nothing here he wanted to take along. Those four renegades had destroyed everything they couldn't take with them. The kitchen floor was a mess of flour and sugar and coffee and beans; dishes and pots and pans and skillets had been tramped into ruin. The small stock of clothing on the shelves was slashed and ruined.

Pete Isom prowled around, feeling a little sick inside. He went on to the whiskey still a couple of hundred yards away. The still had been smashed, barrels and jugs and bottles broken. The smell of whiskey and sour mash filled the air.

He took a crowbar and a short-handled shovel and went to work. In about fifteen minutes he had a hole dug in under the rock oven where the slow fire had cooked the moonshine. He groped in under the Rimrock that had been covered by the still and hauled out a couple of black-enameled light steel strongboxes, about eighteen inches long and twelve inches deep. Both boxes were locked. He took a couple of small keys from his pocket and opened both boxes. They were filled with neatly stacked sheaves of currency—five, ten, twenty, fifty, one hundred dollar banknotes—Hank Isom's life's savings.

Pete did not bother to count it. He locked the boxes and found a gunnysack and dropped both boxes in the sack. Then he walked on back to the barn.

Pete Isom saddled a fresh horse. He wrapped the two strongboxes in his yellow saddle slicker and tied it on the back of his saddle. It made a bulky bulge behind the high cantle.

After that he rounded up the horses in the pasture and opened the gate and drove them on ahead, leaving the gate standing wide open.

This was Pete Isom's home—the only one he could remember. He had been too young to have any recollection of the town home at Kaycee where Hank Isom and his wife and son had lived until the wife had died and Hank Isom had been talked into running the ranch behind the Red Wall.

So this little place with its log buildings and pole corrals had been Pete Isom's home. And now he was quitting it, riding away from it and leaving behind him countless little things in the way of memories and dreams.

He had made pets and companions of wild animals and birds. And now as he rode away he could hear a magpie scolding. The sound twisted his heart and broke the hard lump that had been choking him. Hot tears coursed down his tanned face and sobs racked him as he rode blindly on, like a drunken man. He did not look back. . . .

CHAPTER THREE

Hell on Powder River!

MORGAN ROBERTS, sheriff at Kaycee, Wyoming, was a big man—big in every way. He had shaggy iron-gray hair and a drooping iron-gray mustache that came down across the corners of his wide mouth to almost hide the slow grin that was usually there. A pair of bright, steel-gray eyes twinkled under heavy, craggy brows. Morgan Roberts stood six feet four without his boots on and he weighed close to two hundred and fifty pounds and it was all big bone and hard meat. Yet he could handle himself faster and better than most men of the middleweight class and he was easy on a horse. A big, easy going, good-natured man, Morg Roberts had a deep, soft-toned voice and a slow temper. He was apt to give almost any man the benefit of the doubt. They said of Sheriff Morg that he had more friends than he had enemies riding the Outlaw Trail. His word was good; there was no kind of treachery in him. But cross Morg Roberts up in any way and he would punish you. He had only hatred and contempt for a man who broke the code of the cow country.

It was about supper time when somebody rapped at the front door of his house at the edge of town at Kaycee. Sheriff Morgan Roberts was sitting in his big easy chair in the front room, reading a week-old newspaper while his wife got supper and his fourteen-year-old daughter, Amy, set the table. He had taken off his cartridge belt and holstered six-shooter, and belt and gun lay on the big table beside the lamp. He reached out and took the gun and slid it down beside him in the arm-chair. Then he told Amy to see who was at the door.

"It's a boy, and he looks hungry." Amy was peering out through the front window.

"Then let him in. Tell him he better wipe his feet, though, or Maw will sweep him right back out. . . ."

Amy was leggy, and her straight black hair was parted in the middle and plaited in two heavy braids. Her eyes were deep gray, fringed by heavy black lashes. She had a short nose and a wide, generous mouth. She was putting on airs when she opened the door, despite a sty that drooped her left eyelid slightly.

"This is the home of Sheriff Morgan Roberts. Who is it you wished to see?"

Pete Isom stood there in the dusk with a heavy gunnysack. He pulled off his old hat

and a flush stained his tanned face to the roots of his straw-colored hair.

"Yes ma'am." His voice was changing. It broke dismally.

Amy Roberts wanted to giggle. Her dark gray eyes twinkled. Then she remembered the sty on her eye. The boy was staring at it.

"The kids at school said I spit on the trail," she volunteered. "So I got a sty."

That made Pete feel a little more at ease. "Is the Sheriff here?"

"Right in here, son."

Sheriff Morgan Roberts recognized Pete. He had seen him at the Isom place off and on for the past several years, and had watched the boy work on the round-up. He motioned Pete to a chair and cocked a bushy eyebrow at the gunnysack.

Pete did not sit down. He handed the gunnysack with its square-shaped contents to the grizzled peace officer.

"Hank always said if ever I got in a tight to come straight to you. . . . I'd like for you to keep this. It's Hank Isom's cache."

The newspaper dropped from the sheriff's hands and his grin abruptly died. He rose slowly to his feet and stood there looking down at Pete, a big, hair-tufted hand on the boy's shoulder.

"What's happened to Hank, son?"

"Hank's dead," said Pete. "He was killed. Three nights ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that, son. . . . Me'n Hank Isom come up the cattle trail outa Texas together, and my missus and your mother was good friends. Hank took her death pretty hard, and I sent him out to that ranch behind the Red Wall, to git him outa town. Anyway, I wanted to have at least one friend behind the Red Wall, just in case. But I never needed him thataway, and he never turned in an outlaw in ary way to me when the citizens of Kaycee pinned a law badge on my vest. Hank Isom never done a mean ornery thing in his life. . . ."

He took Pete's shoulders in his big hands and pushed him gently down into a big armchair. Then he winked at his daughter.

"Set a place for Pete Isom, chicken."

When Amy had gone, somewhat reluctantly, Morgan Roberts nodded and grinned faintly.

"Wimmin," he said. "All alike. They commence young. . . . Now how did Hank Isom come to die, son?"

"They hung him."

"Huh!" The big sheriff grunted like he'd been kicked in the belly.

"Four renegades — strangers," enlarged Pete. "They beat him up, then hung him. But they didn't locate the cache. I sighted 'em ride off. I'll know 'em again."

Sheriff Morgan Roberts nodded grimly. He told Pete to come along now and they'd get washed up for supper and after they'd eaten they would sit back and Pete could tell him about it and they'd make a little Law medicine.

"I'll run 'em down, son," the sheriff promised.

But Pete stubbornly shook his ahead. "I'm makin' that my job, sir."

PETE ISOM'S voice was flat-toned and final. Morg Roberts had a rare understanding of men of all kinds and ages and he knew then and there that nothing he could say would ever change the grim intention of Hank Isom's son, Pete. Pete was made of sterner, tougher stuff than ever had gone into the genial, good-natured make-up of Hank Isom.

Sheriff Morg Roberts did not make the mistake of trying to dissuade young Pete. He nodded his shaggy head in agreement and said he knew just how Pete felt about it.

He took the heavy gunnysack, laid it on the table, then led Pete on out through the kitchen to the lean-to shed where there was a bucket of water and a clean wash basin and roller towel.

"You remember Pete Isom, Maw. He'll stay with us a while. Hank's dead. If that's hot water singing' in the kettle, Amy might fetch it out to us."

Pete Isom ate his first hot meal then since he'd had supper at the round-up camp. He didn't realize he was hungry until he sat down at the supper table.

After supper, the sheriff lit his pipe and sank deep into his chair and told Pete to tell him about it. And he listened without once interrupting while Pete Isom recounted the grim story of Hank Isom's hanging as he, Pete, had figured it out. He finished with a detailed description of the four drifting renegades.

Sheriff Morgan Roberts did not believe in gathering up a big posse of men and taking after anybody; not unless the trail was hotter than a prairie fire. All posses ever did was ride down good horses and get underfoot and mess up any tracks a man might follow. It was better to wait, he explained to Pete Isom, until the dust had settled—till those four coyotes figured they'd shaken off any hounds that might be trailing them.

"They'll come outa their hole, then. And then we'll ketch 'em," he promised flatly.

Pete Isom said nothing. He was young and had a youth's impatience, and waiting was not in his book. He had no intention of sitting back and waiting for dust to settle. But he said nothing to Sheriff Morgan Roberts about what he planned to do.

Pete Isom had not come to the law for help. All he wanted was to leave the two strongboxes with Morgan Roberts for safekeeping until he got back—if he got back.

Pete had no faith in the Law—he had lived

too long behind the Red Wall to put any trust in law. It was Morgan Roberts, the man, he had come to see. Pete was not running to Sheriff Morgan Roberts with his troubles.

Pete Isom could pick up a cold trail and follow it as well as any man. He had a six-shooter and a saddle carbine and cartridges for both guns. He knew how to travel light, and where to pick up a fresh horse or stop for a bait of grub. He had never pulled a gun on a man, but he was old enough to learn. And he was not going to give any of those four renegades a fighting chance for his life, not if he could help it.

There at the Isom ranch behind the Red Wall, young Pete Isom had sat, closed-mouthed and out from underfoot, while the real outlaws who rode in through the Hole augered and drank corn likker. And sometimes, when their talk loosened up and they forgot the boy was there or didn't give a damn because Hank's kid was a good boy, young Pete Isom picked up some mighty valuable bits of knowledge.

For one thing, he had gained a working plan of how men act when they are on the dodge and what to do if he were ever hunted or if he had to track down a man. And he could sit down right now and draw a map of the outlaw country where he had been sent from time to time on seemingly innocent errands like returning a borrowed horse or going to some distant ranch to pick up and fetch back one of his Figure 8 horses that had "strayed." Thus Pete had gradually grown up in the way of an outlaw without ever realizing it. The outlaw code was the only set of laws young Pete believed in, and while he had never been more than a messenger kid for outfits like the Curry Gang and the Wild Bunch, he had been well-schooled for the Outlaw Trail.

He sat there and listened to this veteran peace officer talk. Sheriff Morgan Roberts was a man you could trust with a secret, a man you could bank on. And Pete admired the big man for all he was. But he could not believe in all the laws that the sheriff stood for. He trusted and admired Morg Roberts, the man. But he had an outlaw's distrust of Morgan Roberts, the sheriff, and that nickel-plated law badge he wore.

"When the sign is right, son, I'll go after them four skalawags," the sheriff promised. "And if you want to go along, I'll deputize you. That way, you'll be in on the kill when I hang their coyote hides on the fence. But till the sign is right, you make out here with us. What you need right now is a good night's sleep. It's already past bed time. You'll use the spare room."

He lifted his voice to call to his daughter Amy. "Fetch a lamp, chicken, and light Pete to his room. And mind you don't pester him with too many questions."

But it was Maw Roberts who now took over. She was an apple-cheeked ranch woman with a light sprinkling of gray in her reddish-brown hair and a twinkle in her dark brown eyes. She still taught school as a substitute schoolmarm, and she had a way with the younger generation of the cow country.

"That man of mine," she made a joke of it, "always tries to get away with it, but he never does. He'll come back from a two-weeks trip, eat like a starved animal, and then try to sneak off to bed without a bath. And he growls and complains I've sawed his horns off to the nubbin when I make him soak the dirt off. . . . The tub's out in the wash shed, Pete. If the water's too hot, let it cool. Just don't go spoiling it by dumping in too much cold water. Your room's ready and there's a change of clean clothes some cowpuncher about your size left behind. Leave yours for the next feller. Now don't forget to scrub behind your ears. . . ."

THAT hot bath with strong smelling yellow soap felt as good as the warm supper. He was in bed, swathed in one of the sheriff's big nightshirt, when the door opened cautiously and little Amy's voice came through the dark.

Gothic
JARPROOF
The only watch whose HEART* is
GUARANTEED A LIFETIME
Protected by a patented mechanism, GOTHIC JARPROOF watches "can take a licking yet keep on ticking." Precision built, exquisitely styled. Priced from $33.75 to $1,000 Write for free booklet "PP"
BALANCE STAFF AND ITS JEWELS
GOTHIC JARPROOF WATCH CORP., NEW YORK 19.

"*Pst!* You awake, Pete?"

"Yes ma'am."

He heard her excited giggle. "Don't ma'am me. I'm Amy. Which do you like best, horehound or peppermint or lemon?"

"Huh?"

"Stick candy. Which flavor?"

"Oh! Well, horehound, mebby."

"That's good. It's the kind I like the leastest. Here."

Pete had never had much chance to go to school or mingle wtih kids his age. He was girl-shy to where it was agony to talk to one, but it was dark and the horehound candy tasted good and before long he was sitting up in bed while Amy sat on the edge of it in her long flannel nightgown and pigtails, and they talked easily enough once they got over the barrier of awkwardness. It was mostly Amy's kind of talk, school kid stuff. For a while it sounded childish and silly, till Pete got the hang of it. Then he was asking clumsy questions about school and living in town and dressing up on Sunday to go to church and all kinds of stuff like that.

"I bet," she said, "you'll lick any kid in school, even the big kids. Wait till I show up at school Monday. I won't tell 'em who you are at first. They always pick on a new kid. But the teacher won't let you pack a six-shooter. You'll have to leave your gun here at home, Pete. But you won't need it. When I tell 'em you're Pete Isom from the Isom ranch behind the Red Wall, that'll settle it. They'll eat outa your hand from there on, I bet. They never seen—saw—a real outlaw. . . ."

Pete Isom had no intention of going to school and said so. And in the heavy silence that followed that flat declaration he heard her breathing fast. Then something that sounded like a stifled sob came out of the darkness.

"But you *got* to go to school, Pete. . . . I heard Papa tell Mamma that it was time you got some education. He said Hank Isom had left his boy Pete mighty well fixed, but that you need an education to hang onto it. Papa's your guardeen. That makes you my brother, sort of. You need a good home and a decent bringing up. And it's time you got it, because ever since you was old enough to spell Cow with a C Circle W, you've been raised by outlaws and it's a wonder you ain't tough instead of just a clean-minded tow-headed kid. But something horrible happened to set you going down the wrong trail, and it's going to take all that Papa and Mamma and me can do to hold you back. And even then we're liable to lose out unless God A'mighty takes a hand in the saving of Pete Isom. . . ."

Amy paused now, out of breath from her parrotlike recital of what she had overheard while Pete was taking his hot bath.

Somewhere a door opened and closed. Like a shot, Amy was off the edge of the bed and on her bare feet.

"I guess," she whispered, "I better go now, before Mamma finds out I ain't in bed asleep. But if we hurry, we've got time to say our prayers together. Climb out, Pete—hurry! Now on your knees. . . ."

Pete Isom did not know any prayer. The name of God was something men used when they cussed. He felt like some kind of a weakling and was glad it was so dark, kneeling there beside the big bed.

Amy's voice a husky whisper beside him. "Our Father Who art in Heaven. . . ."

She halted. "You ain't saying yours," she cried in his ear.

"I don't know the words. . . ."

"Oh. . . . Then I'll go slow, and you say 'em after me. That's the way I learned. You ready?"

"I reckon so. . . ."

"Our Father Who art in Heaven. . . ."

Outside the closed door, Sheriff Morgan Roberts and his good wife paused, listening.

". . . and deliver us from all evil. Amen."

Sheriff Morgan Roberts and his wife moved on, on back to the lamplight in the front room. Somebody was rapping loudly at the front door.

"Rattle your hocks, sheriff! Hell's busted loose on Powder River!"

CHAPTER FOUR

War Talk

THE Powder River Cattle War was like something made to order for such renegades as Big Swede and Baldy and Slim Jim and Mex. Their bushwhacker guns were for hire to the highest bidder, and this looked like a chance to cash in big on the kind of work they wanted.

Baldy and Mex Fletcher wanted to throw in with the nesters. Slim Jim Jones said he knew a big cow outfit who would pay them a bounty on every dead nester they dry-gulched.

"I got a notion beats that all to hell," said big Swede Sanderson. "While them big outfits and the little fellers they call rustlers is fightin' it out, what's to keep four good cowhands from movin' in and grabbing the big jackpot that they're fightin' about?"

"What would we do with the land, you big squarehead, even if we could grab it?" snarled Baldy.

"Land, hell! Who wants to be land pore? Yonder's camped what I mean to grab off." And Swede pointed a long arm at the roundup that was camped on feed and water a few miles away.

It was the Powder River Pool outfit that Pete Isom had been repping with. The deal

had been made and the herd trimmed and made ready for the trail to Montana—cattle in a dozen or more brands that were owned by the small ranchers beyond the Hole-in-the-Wall country.

Honest cattlemen, or rustlers? Back at Kaycee, you would hear both sides of that question hotly debated, and many an argument had blazed into gunfire out on the open range and sometimes in town. You could take sides and get a bellyfull, no matter which faction you favored.

Long Tom Taylor was ramrodding the Powder River Pool. And while there might be good reason for doubting the range honesty of some of the cowmen whose brands were in the Pool, no man could say, without lying, that Long Tom Taylor was a cattle thief.

Long Tom had been more blunt than tactful in trimming his herd. He had cut back everything that did not wear an honest iron.

"Not that I got anything agin' you fellers, personal," he told the owners of the brands he was cutting back. "But I don't want nobody haltin' my trail herd to make a Winchester cut. I sent word to Sheriff Morg Roberts at Kaycee to come out and inspect the herd before we start up the trails. I'm savin' Morg the trouble of cuttin' back a few brands. I don't want to make no hard feelin's, but if you pick it up thataway, then that's the way we'll have to play it. I'm takin' a clean herd up the trail to Montana, regardless."

There were only a few who held any grudge against Long Tom Taylor. And those few were out-and-out cattle rustlers who lived on the ragged edge of the big outfits and made no bones about it. They bellyached when the Pool ramrod cut their cattle back, then packed their beds and cut their strings of saddle horses and pulled out. They talked a lot about the big range war that was brewing and what tough parts they would take in it. But they made no open threats against Long Tom Taylor and the trail herd he was pointing north.

Their departure left Long Tom short-handed for men. But Long Tom still counted on young Pete Isom showing up. And then if Hank decided to come along for a cook, he'd have six men besides himself. And it wasn't a big herd. He could pick up an additional man or two when the outfit reached Kaycee.

Long Tom had only four men in his outfit when Swede Sanderson pointed it out to Baldy and Slim Jim and Mex, at sunset, when Long Tom was grazing his cattle onto their bedground.

"Four of 'em." The Big Swede's green eyes glittered in the sunset. "That's one apiece fer us. We'll gang up on Long Tom, and it'll be some pickin's!"

Baldy argued that they'd never get away with it, and the Big Swede cussed him.

"There's a short cut to a quick market in South Dakota," the Swede said, "that's the trail we point them dogies along. There's a range war a-comin' and it's due to bust loose any time. Nobody's goin' to take the time ner the trouble to stop us from trailin' a bunch of cattle outa Wyoming. We kill off the owners of them cattle, an' then it's our trail herd, ain't it? What the hell we got to lose?"

"That's what you told us," argued Baldy, "when you taken us through the Hole-in-the-Red Wall to Hank Isom's ranch. And what did we git?"

"Free grub and likker, you bald-headed croakin' buzzard," grinned Slim Jim. "The Swede's right. What have we got to lose? How's your pulse, Mex?"

"Deal me in. What the hell are we waitin' fer?"

"Dark," said Swede Sanderson. "There'll be two men on first guard. All we got to do is bend a gun barrel over their heads. Or Mex kin bloody that pig-sticker he's got whetted. Then we slip into camp and git the other two and Long Tom while they're asleep between the blankets. It's easy pickin's."

That was what big Swede Sanderson called it.

"IT was cold-blooded murder, Morg." Long Tom Taylor stood there in the doorway, tall and gaunt, his leathery face gray and grim.

He said he had ridden away from camp after dark. "I'd had to let some of my Pool men go and it left me too short-handed to move my herd," he declared. "We'd moved camp and was about fifteen miles from the Isom ranch, so I rode there to talk Hank into lettin' Pete come along and to git Hank to quit his ranch and trail north. I don't know what happened at the Isom ranch, Morg, but it was wrecked, and there's a new grave. . . ."

"Hank's dead—murdered," said Morg Roberts flatly. "Pete's here. . . . Don't talk too loud, Tom—the kid's asleep. I'll tell you about him later. What happened to your outfit?"

"I don't know, Morg. It was just breakin' day this mornin' when I got back there. The herd was on their feet and four men was movin' 'em off the bedground, stringin' 'em out. I thought they was my men and I hollered to two of 'em to let them cattle graze off and scatter.

"Then I saw they wasn't my men. One of 'em taken a shot at me. Another 'un cussed him for bein' too quick-triggered. Then they all four taken after me. They turned the herd loose and tried to cut me down. My shortest cut was past the wagons, and as I rode past I seen two of my men layin' dead on the ground by their beds with their pants and boots off. They'd bin killed while they was asleep and then drug outa their blankets. And when I

looked back I seen what looked like two other dead men on the ground near last night's bedground. . . . Them four gents fogged the hell outa me but I give 'em the slip and headed fer Kaycee. It's a long ride and I changed horses three times along the way. Well, I've lost my trail herd, by Godfrey, but I'm gittin' it back!"

"Them four cattle stealin' killers, Tom." The sheriff poured out a tumblerful of whiskey and handed it to the Pool ramrod. "What did they look like?"

"One of 'em is a sandy-whiskered feller—bigger'n a skinned mule. There's another as bald as a pool ball. I seen that Slim Jim long-geared gent git his backside whupped with a doubled rope at Cheyenne a year ago for abusin' a god ropin' horse. And the pock-marked Mexican has bin to town a time or two. . . . I never did get close enough to see the color of their eyes, this time, but they stopped at my place a few weeks ago when I was fixin' to commence the round-up. I fed 'em but wouldn't give 'em a change of horses and when they tackled me fer a job I told 'em the Powder River Pool didn't hire their kind. The big Swede acted ringy about it and so did the others, but some of the boys was there and the sight of a gun taken the paw and beller out of the four of 'em. And if that's the best these big Wyoming outfits kin do fer tough gun hands, then they're in a sorry fix."

Sheriff Morgan Roberts said he didn't think the big outfits hired the four renegades to start the range war.

"I've had bench warrants for them same four gents, Tom, for quite a while," he revealed. "They come fresh from the sheep range where somebody had 'em hired to rob sheep camps and kill off the herders and scatter the bands of woollies. They done their job and when they demanded more money and didn't git it, they waited till the wind was right and set the range afire to burn out the cowmen that hired 'em. The whole deal stunk and I hated to mess into it. So I held off. But now they've murdered Hank Isom and killed off four good Pool men, and I don't feel too good about it."

Sheriff Morgan Roberts put on his hat and tok his saddle carbine from the gun rack. He was emptying a box of .30-30 cartridges into his coat pockets when he saw Pete Isom.

Pete stood in the doorway. He had on clean clothes and looked scrubbed and shiny-clean and he was buckling on a filled cartridge belt with a six-shooter in its holster.

"I'm goin' along," he said. "I was figurin' on slippin' away in the night and pickin' up their trail. I ain't ready for school yet, Sheriff."

Sheriff Morgan Roberts nodded and wiped off a slow smile. "Proud to have you along, son. . . . Maw! Kin you rustle Long Tom a quick bait of grub? We're in kind of a rush."

CHAPTER FIVE

"Fill Your Hands!"

NO four cowhands could handle any kind of a sizeable trail herd—even if they dropped the bed wagon and the mess wagon driver herded along the remuda with the drags. It couldn't be done, any way they wanted to try it. Baldy told the big Swede that and a lot more and he colored it with bitter profanity. They had bitten off too big a chunk for their coyote jaws to handle. They had stolen a whole trail herd outfit—cattle, remuda, and a loaded mess wagon and bed wagon. Cursing and quarreling and jangling wasn't getting them anywhere. The last of Hank Isom's moonshine corn likker was dying out in them to leave their guts cold. They had spooked the cattle with their shooting and spilled the herd all over the country. And they were too coyote-scared to round up the scattered cattle and make a pack outfit cattle drive on up the trail the Swede had bragged would lead them to a quick market in South Dakota.

They changed horses and made a pot of coffee and each man cooked his own meat. They were too shiftless to do any cooking or wash a dish. They ransacked the chuck wagon and bed wagon in a fruitless search for booze, leaving warsacks scattered on the ground and bedrolls spread out with blankets and soogans scattered. They were camp robbers. And that kind of a range crime, with its wanton destruction, was almighty low on the cow country list and called for almost any kind of punishment that came handy when one of the breed was caught.

They had let Long Tom Taylor get away alive. The last they had seen of the Powder River Pool ramrod, he had been headed for Kaycee and traveling fast. They knew that Long Tom would come back, and they knew, too, that he wouldn't be alone.

They debated stealing the Pool remuda and finally decided against it. There was no market in Wyoming for a bunch of stolen horses. Their only bet was to drift—drift fast and get a long ways away. They could live off the country as they went, and change horses as often as they could steal fresh mounts. The hell of it was, though, they did not know which way to run. No big outfit would hire them. The wanton killing they had just finished tore their chances of throwing in with the smaller outfits. They had to go down the Outlaw Trail. And even then they had to take the gamble that nobody had found the hanged body of Hank Isom and tied them up with Hank's death. Because once the rustling of the leaves carried that news down the dim trail, they

were goners. The real outlaws who rode those dim trails always took care of their own, and outlaw punishment was swift, brutal and deadly.

Their one way back was through the Hole-in-the-Red Wall—back to the Hank Isom ranch, then on down into Brown's Hole and into Utah. From there, they would keep going till they reached the Mexican border.

The four renegades could split up here and each take his chance alone. But they lacked the guts to split up and scatter, each man for himself. They were a coyote pack and the big Swede was still their leader. So they saddled fresh horses and the big Swede rode in the lead as they headed back for the Isom ranch behind the Red Wall. They hoped to find a keg of booze they had overlooked in their destructive search for Hank Isom's cache. They needed whiskey to thaw the chill of fear inside their yellow bellies, and crowded their stolen horses to the limit to get there.

They left the round-up camp in a shambles, making no attempt to cover the sign they left behind.

And that was what Sheriff Morgan Roberts and Long Tom Taylor and young Pete Isom rode up to find the cattle scattered, the wagons ransacked, and everything strewn around and tromped over. And there were four dead Pool men to bury.

They wrapped the dead cowhands in their bed tarps. Then Pete rounded up the remuda and corraled the horses and they caught fresh mounts.

"Whichaway, Morg?" Long Tom Taylor's voice was low-toned, grim.

"They went back through the Hole-in-the-Red Wall," said young Pete Isom. "I kin show you their tracks."

Sheriff Morgan Roberts nodded. "I knowed you'd do to take along, son."

Neither man questioned the boy's flat statement. And when Pete pointed out the trail left by the four renegades, the two older men exchanged quick looks and grim nods of silent approval.

Pete Isom said they had the four killers bottled up behind the Red Wall. "They're afoot right now," said Pete, "for a change of horses. I taken the Figure 8 remuda and dropped it in Long Tom's horse pasture on my way to Kaycee. There ain't a horse left at the Isom ranch."

The sheriff pointed to some fresh horse sign, and they knew that they were not more than a few hours behind the four renegades, when Pete Isom led the way in through the Hole-in-the-Red Wall. It was sundown.

It was also sundown for Big Swede and Baldy and Slim Jim and Mex. They knew it when they saw the pasture gate standing wide open and the horse pasture empty. They knew

WINCHESTER

batteries give long-lasting light *bullet-fast*

The 18 months shelf-life of Winchester (No. 1511) flashlight batteries makes them favorites. In homes their *bullet-fast* light insures safety to every trip to darkened basement, attic, or outdoors. Farmers almost literally cannot live without them. One writes—"I know I'm safe using my flashlight in haymows or when I must shine light inside the machinery I'm working on."

Don't go another night without a flashlight loaded with *fresh*, Winchester batteries. See the Winchester Self-Service cabinet where flashlights and batteries are sold. Winchester Repeating Arms Co., New Haven, Conn., Division of Olin Industries, Inc.

UNUSUAL LIGHTS THAT HAVE SERVED MAN . . . To warn vessels running dangerously near the shore, the U. S. Life Saving Service, in 1873, used a cartridge made of slow-burning chemicals mounted in a hollow piece of wood and ignited by a plunger. Today, at the flick of a switch, you can have portable light, *bullet-fast* from your Winchester flashlight and batteries.
FLASHLIGHT
WINCHESTER
UNIT CELL

DIVISION OF OLIN INDUSTRIES INC. WINCHESTER BATTERIES Make light of the dark *bullet-fast*

it when they sighted the empty hangman noose and when they saw Hank Isom's fresh grave.

"Somebody," the big Swede's voice was a croaking whisper, "has bin here!"

Baldy had ridden on to the whiskey still. They heard his shout—it had a tortured sound. He was pointing to the gaping hole where Pete had dug up Hank Isom's hidden cache. The others rode up to share the bitterness of that discovery. After that they searched the ruined still for a keg or bottle of moonshine booze they might have overlooked in their wanton destruction. But the camp robbers had done a thorough job. There was not a drop of booze left.

NO man-made law could have devised a more fitting retribution. They were sick and their raw nerves cried out for booze. They had been drunk for a couple of weeks, and now there was no whiskey to warm their cold guts. They needed fresh horses and there was no grub left unspoiled. Their only way out was the way they had come in through the Hole-in-the-Red Wall. And somebody had been here. Somebody had cut down Hank Isom's hanged body and buried it. Somebody might be watching them now.

"Let's git the hell outa here!" The big Swede jabbed his played-out horse with the spurs.

The others quirted and spurred. They got as far as the meat house scaffold that had been Hank Isom's gallows, just as the sun dropped behind the broken skyline. And then the deep-toned voice of Sheriff Morgan Roberts stopped them.

"I'm Sheriff Roberts. Don't throw away your guns. Long Tom Taylor and Hank Isom's son, Pete, is with me. We're takin' no live pris'ners. So fill your hands!"

The big Swede and Baldy and Slim Jim and Mex already had guns in their hands.

"Hank Isom hung hisself!" The bid Swede's voice was a croaking scream. "He hung hisself!"

Pete Isom rode out from behind the barn and reined up. He lifted his saddle carbine and lined his sights on big Swede Sanderson's dirty red flannel undershirt and pulled the trigger.

The crack of the .30-30 carbine was sharp and loud and its echo was thrown back by the high rocks. The big Swede jerked in the saddle and the saddle gun in his hand exploded. His head, with its sandy red beard, wobbled and sagged, and then his big bulk toppled forward and he pitched over headlong along the neck of his played-out horse. His legs flailed the air as he went over and landed with a heavy crash and lay on the ground in a motionless heap. Pete Isom had shot to kill with the first shot he had ever taken at a man. His .30-30 bullet had smashed through the Swede's ribs and mushroomed on to tear out the big renegade's heart. The Swede was dead when he hit the ground.

Sheriff Morgan Roberts had not anticipated Pete's bold move. But now he and Long Tom acted swiftly to take the fight away from the boy. They rode straight into the hail of bullets that came from the three remaining renegade guns. But they rode with their guns blazing, and they were not shooting to miss. And meanwhile, Pete Isom was shooting as fast as he could lever his saddle gun.

It was a short, deadly fight, the odds even, the range no farther than fifty yards and the light good. But they were not lining their gun sights. This was fast snap-shooting at moving targets. The high rocks of the Red Wall threw back the gun echoes.

Slim Jim and Mex Fletcher put up a desperate last stand. But the fear of death was spoiling their aim and while they shot as fast as they could work their guns, their shots went wild and the bullets from the sheriff's gun and the saddle gun in Long Tom's grip cut them down.

Baldy had jumped his horse in behind the big Swede's, and he used his first shot to send a bullet into the Swede's back. But the Swede was already dead from Pete's bullet.

Baldy's hat had fallen off and his hairless head glistened nakedly with beads of cold sweat. He was making horrible, inhuman sounds as he emptied his gun at the men who had tracked him and his renegade pardners down. Three bullets thudded into his belly as his croaking voice lifted to a scream. He was cursing the big Swede when a bullet hit him square in the mouth and tore a gaping hole in his bald skull.

The fight was over. The last gunshot echoes died out behind the Red Wall. One big wagon sheet would have covered the four dead renegades where they lay below the meat scaffold where Hank Isom had hanged himself.

Four ropes dangled there, three of them with big meat hooks knotted at the ends.

Sheriff Morgan Roberts pointed his smoking gun barrel at the four ropes, then at the four dead renegades.

"They got off too easy," he said in his quiet, deep-toned voice.

Then he asked Pete Isom if he'd been hit and Pete said no. Long Tom, too, had come through without a scratch, and so had the sheriff.

Now, Pete suddenly remembered the prayer he had said last night, while kneeling beside little Amy Roberts in the dark room of the sheriff's house.

". . . God protect my Papa. God protect my new brother Pete. . . ."

"You sure you're not hit, son?" Morg Roberts asked again.

Pete shook his head There was a lump in his throat, and he was staring now at the four dead men. He threw away his gun and leaned over and became suddenly very ill. . . .

CHAPTER SIX

From Behind the Red Wall

A WEEK later a trail herd moved off the bedground and was strung out. Long Tom Taylor and Morg Roberts rode the point. And riding the swing ahead of the drags came Pete Isom and across the strung-out herd from Pete was Amy Roberts. She sat a horse like she had been born in the saddle. Her eyes were starry and she chattered like a magpie in the morning sunlight.

Morgan Roberts' wife drove the four-horse team hooked to the chuck wagon. She was coming along to cook for the outfit. Morg Roberts said they'd have to wash, sure enough, at meal times, and they'd have to keep their cussing clean.

"And stop your ears," smiled May Roberts, who could handle a four-horse team like a stagecoach driver, "if ever I bog down this outfit crossing some crick that ain't a gravel bottom."

Pie three times a day, she promised Pete with a smile.

There were six small cowmen who had thrown their cattle into the pool trail herd that was going to Montana. They were leaving Wyoming before the range war broke out. They were not cowards, nor were they killers. They were cattlemen who wanted no more than a chance on a new range to make a decent living.

Sheriff Morgan Roberts had turned in his law badge. He told the men who had elected him that he wanted no part in the range war that was bound to come. He said he had too many friends on both sides—too many staunch friends behind the Red Wall. They understood. They shook hands and wished him good luck.

It was a long trail to Montana. But the feed was good all the way and there were few dry camps because there were plenty of creeks and water holes and the weather held good all the way. The cattle did not put on weight, but they were in good shape at the start and they did not shrink. Morg Roberts and Long Tom were good trailmen. For both of them, Texans who had come up with the big trail herds out of Texas, this was a short trail. And they had plenty of time in which to make it.

They all packed saddle guns. But not once along the trail did they have occasion to use a gun. This was Sheriff Morg's trail herd, and it was young Pete Isom's trail herd. And now and then of an evening men on horseback whom they had sighted along the skyline would ride into camp for a cup of hot strong coffee and a bait of Maw Roberts' grub. They were heavily armed men, men from behind the Red Wall, riding armed escort. Morg Roberts' eyes would twinkle when they joshed him quietly about chases they had matched with him when he wore a law badge. These men were outlaws, but now they were paying a sort of tribute to the memory of Hank Isom, who had been their friend. They were doing this for Hank Isom's boy, Pete. And they were darned glad to do it.

Pete Isom, they said, was a good boy—a darned good boy.

Evenings, around camp, Maw Roberts got out school books from the chuck wagon and held school for Amy and Pete in her mess tent. Pete was eager to learn, and by the time they had reached the banks of the Missouri River and turned the herd loose and located on their new range, Pete Isom had acquired considerable book learning.

Morgan Roberts bought out a rancher there on the Missouri River, and they moved into the log cabins already built. Long Tom Taylor located on the other side of the river and sent for his wife to join him.

"Till you come of age, Pete," said Morg Roberts, "your home is with us. When you do come of age, I'll turn over to you what Hank Isom left you. It's a lot of money, son, and you'll need an education to handle it. You ain't scared of goin' to school? Maw's got the schoolmarm job here on the river. . . ."

"No, sir. I'm not scared of school—not any more."

Pete Isom smiled quietly. He was thinking ahead, a long ways ahead. It was something he and Amy had talked out, and he thought it might be a good idea to tell Morg Roberts about it now.

"When I'm twenty-one," he said, "Amy will be seventeen. Maw Roberts told us she was only seventeen when you married her. So if it is all right with you, when the time comes. . . ." Pete Isom began to lose his nerve.

"It'll be all right with me, son, and with Maw, too. And when the time comes, we'll all have ourselves a time. We might as well shake on it."

They shook hands solemnly. A little later, Morg Roberts crossed the river to Long Tom's place.

"He's a god boy, Tom. . . . Pete Isom is a good boy." And he added, "Hank's layin' easy in his grave now. His boy Pete has rode out for keeps from Behind the Red Wall."

THE END

MEASURE OF A MAN

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

He aimed and fired.

RIGHT from the start, even before the party left Dodge City, Reb Hanna had known the Englishman would cause him trouble—and at a time when he could least afford trouble. This late fall hunt, with the big herds already gone south and the sting of winter in the air, was more than a sporting event to Reb Hanna. He wanted it to be a turning point in his life; the end of an era, so to speak, and the beginning of another. But there was the dude Englishman, with his shooting jacket and his fancy foreign rifles and his easy air of know-it-all, saying again, "Rather a tame sport, this."

"Tame sport, hell!" Reb Hanna muttered, but the blast of the English rifle drowned out his voice.

It was easy enough, once the stand was made. The buffalo was a queer critter. Let him sight or scent man and horse, and he'd be off in a stampede. But properly stalked he would stand dumbly at his grazing until a whole herd was destroyed, a dumb brute undisturbed by gun shots.

But this hadn't been easy for Reb Hanna, who had hired out as a guide and already had earned his pay. He had spent hours in the saddle to find this stand, and considered himself lucky. It wasn't just that the buffalo had headed south to winter; each season the herds were getting smaller, and bones were scattered the length and breadth of the Great Plains. The buffalo was being killed off. There was a great slaughter on, by hide-hunters and

Reb Hanna hated the dude Englishman with his fancy guns and know-it-all airs. . . . But one day of red hell on the Staked Plains taught him his mistake—when it was too late to do anything about it but fight one last, hopeless battle!

by so-called sportsmen such as these people. And the sportsmen were like a plague of locusts, innumerable.

Reb Hanna was guide for a party of six. There was the young Englishman, Geoffry Keith, son of the Earl of Dunleigh. There was a pompous senator from Washington, and an Army officer who, before this, had never even seen the frontier. There was a millionaire silver king from Virginia City, and his young but marriageable daughter. There was a gambler-civic leader—to whom the game was not entirely new—from Dodge City. But of the six, it was Keith who was making the trouble for Reb Hanna.

"I should like to try it from horseback, don't you know?"

Keith was an odd admixture of modest man and braggart. He not only was a crack shot and a fine horseman, but an expert with a woman. He danced attendance to the silver king's daughter. He was a lanky fellow in tailored tweeds, a dark and moody sort with just enough good looks to make a woman's eyes light up with interest. The Dodge gambler, Len Mowery, had told Reb Hanna that Keith was courting the silver bonanza millions—and that the silver king hankered to have his rather plain daughter marry a man who had a title in the offing.

Mounted now, the Englishman was riding toward the survivors of the buffalo herd. The great tawny animals caught sight or scent of him, however, and suddenly were in stampede. Reb Hanna mounted his pinto and rode after Keith, afraid the tenderfoot would wound one of the spooked bulls. But Keith had the devil's own luck. Riding a chestnut that was fine horseflesh, sitting a saucer-shaped saddle, Keith raced alongside the herd and did his shooting in a cool and methodical way. He fired at the biggest bull in the lot, fired a second time, and had the animal stumbling. Reb Hanna had his Sharps ready, but the wounded bull made no infuriated charge at its tormentor. Keith's third shot brought it down, with a great thrashing of body and head and legs. Another shot, carefully placed, finished off the animal.

"Good shooting," Reb had to admit, as he reined in.

"Better sport from horseback," said Keith, modestly. "But I'm rather afraid that ends the shoot."

The survivors were high-tailing it across the rolling prairie, their brown bodies glistening in the sunlight. . . . .

CAMP had been set up along Crooked Dog Creek, a branch of the Red River, alongside a stand of cottonwoods and willows. Old Sam Royce, the Nevada silver king, and host to the party, had provided tents—two large ones for himself and his male guests, a smaller one for his daughter, and another that served as a cook shack. The cook had been hired from a Dodge City eating-place, and that sundown the party dined on buffalo steaks along with the other fare. Geoffry Keith had tea brewed for himself and for Millicent Royce, Old Sam's daughter, while the men drank brandy.

Once the meal was over, the men smoked and drank and talked. Reb Hanna rolled himself a quirly and wondered when he could get a chance to talk to Sam Royce, alone. He had been trying to talk business with the old-timer since the start of the hunt, but without success. He wanted Royce to invest in the future; Reb could read the handwriting on the wall, so far as the buffalo was concerned. But unlike other buffalo and hide-hunters he wasted no time bemoaning the passing of the great herds. He saw the grass of the Staked Plains and knew that cattle could, and would, one day, replace the buffalo. He wanted an in on this future; he wanted to buy up a breeding herd in the Colorado bottoms, and start a ranch here on the Plains. . . . It would take capital and a big grubstake, and he hoped to get that grubstake from grizzled old Sam Royce, who had money to burn. But Reb still had to impress Sam Royce with the change that was coming to the country. He had to impress the old man with himself. But he could seldom get two words with the man. Keith, even now, was dominating the conversation with his mild but bragging talk.

"When I say buffalo hunting is tame sport," the Englishman was saying, "I mean comparatively speaking. Now, I have hunted elephants in Ceylon and tigers in Bengal—"

"Bengal?" said Millicent Royce, hanging onto the man's words in a wide-eyed way. "Just where is that, Geof?"

"India, my dear. . . . Really quite a place. But then, I have hunted wild boars in Punjabi, too, from horseback and with only a spear. A dangerous business, that. Once I saw a native attacked by a boar. . . . Ugh!"

Reb Hanna said, speaking before he thought, "You've never seen a wounded bull buffalo attack a rider, Keith. Else you'd know."

Keith turned an innocent look on him. "Oh come now, you're pulling my leg, old boy. Those tame, clumsy beasts certainly wouldn't attack a man." He smiled at the circle of faces about the campfire. "I'm convinced that your West isn't as wild and woolly as I've been told. The red Indians are abject beggars, not fighting savages. And I've yet to see a single bad man."

"If Bill Cody was here, he could tell you different," Sam Royce said, somewhat offended. He had told Reb Hanna at the start of the hunt that he wanted to show his tenderfoot friends the *real* West—the untamed frontier. "Cody now—he could open your eyes, friend."

"Cody? Ah, you mean the famous Buffalo Bill. . . ." Again Keith indulged in his superior smile. "An ordinary man who found himself in extraordinary situations, no doubt. Consider his fight to the death with the Indian chief, Yellow Knife . . . a brave thing, yes. But any one of us, out of necessity, would have been as courageous. I fear that Mr. Cody's feats are highly colored in the telling, greatly exaggerated."

"Hold on, Keith," said Len Mowery. The gambler from Dodge was a swarthy-skinned man with shrewd dark eyes and an unreadable face. He was famous in his own right, in the gambling circles from Dodge to Frisco. "I don't agree," he argued. "No ordinary man could have faced Yellow Knife, as Cody did, and taken his scalp. Not one of us—not I, Keith, and not you. Reb Hanna possibly might have—"

Keith again looked at Reb Hanna, this time with wonder. "But Mr. Hanna is an ordinary man, surely."

"Not out here on the plains, he isn't," Mowery said.

"Mr. Hanna has merely adapted himself, I'm sure," murmured Keith. "And I disagree that men such as you, Mowery, and I, could not do all that Cody has done—under the same circumstances."

"You like to lay a bet, Keith?" asked Mowery with sudden malice. It was evident that he did not fancy this cocksure Englishman. "I'll wager a thousand dollars that you, the ordinary man, can't whip Reb Hanna in a friendly fight."

"Fisticuffs, sir?" said Keith.

"Friend, you've named your poison," said Mowery.

KEITH did not seem to realize that, with the gambler's help, he had talked himself into a trap. He murmured, "A thousand dollars, eh? Well, why not—if Mr. Hanna is willing?"

Reb Hanna's first impulse was to have none of this. But then he saw that it might work out to his advantage; if he could whip the Englishman in a friendly brawl and show him up for a braggart, he might, at the same time, demonstrate to old Sam Royce that he, himself, was worth consideration and a chance to be heard. Reb flung his quirly butt into the fire, rose, flung aside his big plainsman's hat and stripped off his buckskin shirt.

He bared a muscle-corded chest and powerful shoulders. He was ready to admit he possessed none of Bill Cody's color or flair for showmanship, but when it came to riding, shooting, fighting, he would stand up to any man. Reb never had been boastful, yet his life had been as eventful as that of the man known everywhere as Buffalo Bill. He too had ridden for the Pony Express and worked as a whip for the Overland Stage. He had been an Indian scout, a buffalo hunter for the Union Pacific when it was under construction. He had also done his share of hide-hunting. Reb knew he could handle Geoffry Keith.

Keith had removed his hunting jacket, his cravat and his shirt and undershirt. Now he was flexing his muscles, arms and legs, in the manner of a prizefighter just before a bout. He appeared thin beside Reb Hanna's muscular bulk, but his leanness had strength. He gave Millicent Royce a confident smile. Royce and the Senator were making a bet, Royce on Keith and the Senator on Reb Hanna. The cook and the wrangler and the halfbreed buffalo skinner, who'd done the butchering after the day's kill, were also betting among themselves. The Army officer, Bowen, was out of the betting, so he acted as referee.

Bowen stated the rules: It was to be a fair fight, one without rancor, and no foul blows were to be struck. A knock-out blow would name the winner, unless one contestant tired and called the fight off. "And may the best man win!" shouted Bowen, to start the contest.

Reb Hanna knew but one style of fighting—to leap in and slug and to keep on slugging; he believed in crowding his opponent, in attacking and bulling through from start to finish. But this Englishman warded off his first rush, side-stepped, then neatly dodged his powerful blows. And Reb was surprised, confused.

Keith was cautious; he sparred, feeling his way. He had struck a stiff pose, spread-legged and bent-kneed, with fists stuck out before him. He kept bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet, darting one way and another like a dancer making intricate steps. And then his fists suddenly lashed out.

Reb's head rocked back from a blow to the chin, and from the jolting pain he knew what he was up against. Once, during a trip to Frisco, he had witnessed a prizefight. He recognized that Keith's was that brand of fighting.

Reb gave ground, bewildered. His own punches were parried, ducked, shoved aside, but Keith kept hitting him—hitting him just often enough and hard enough to hurt him. Reb halted his backing up, braced himself, sucked in a great breath, then lunged once more. He hit Keith this time, knocking him over backwards. But the Englishman was quickly up. He was ready for Reb's next rush, side-stepping and striking out at the same time. Reb's ears rang from that blow. He grunted, rammed in at Keith, and got in his second good blow. Keith went down again. But again he came up. And doggedly he started fighting again.

Keith was bleeding at the mouth, now, but his face was grimly set. He had that determined, bulldog British look about him. His fists were held high, guarding his face. Reb rushed again, sure of himself again, and sure, now, that he had Keith beaten. He staggered Keith with a blow to the belt, but at the same time took a blow between the eyes—one that blinded him momentarily.

It was in that moment, as Reb stood shaking his head and trying to clear his blurred vision, that he lost the fight—and his chance to prove himself in the eyes of old Sam Royce. Keith hammered him. Keith saw his chance and took it. Reb's unskilled defense could not stop him. Reb no longer would back away, and he did not know that prize-ring trick of clinching when the going got tough. Reb thought wildly, *He's got me!* And he was right. A blow to the jaw knocked him to his knees; as he staggered back to his feet, a blow to his right jaw toppled him over backwards. He tried to get up, but his muscles were rubbery. Now Captain Bowen was counting him out.

Some of the audience—those who had bet on the Englishman—were yelling and cheering. Reb lay there, his mind denying that he was beaten. Why, in a real knock-down-and-drag-out fight he could have whipped the hide off Keith! He had been tricked by the man's skill, by Keith's unboasted of experience as a prizefighter. Tricked!

"No hard feelings, old chap?"

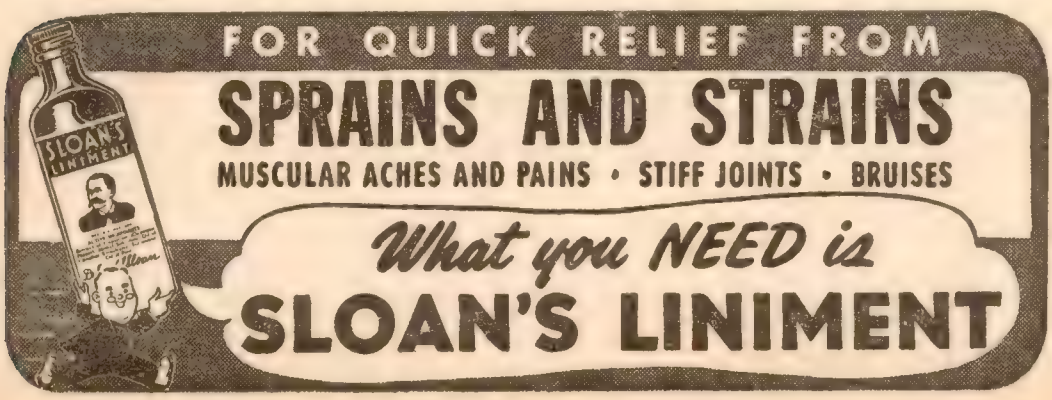
Keith was bending over him, helping him to rise.

Reb said, "No grudge." He had to say that.

And Keith, in a whisper meant only for Reb's ears, added, "Sorry, I had to whip you. You see, if I had lost, I shouldn't have been able to pay off my bet."

SO THAT was Geoffry Keith, a fourflusher—making a bet when he hadn't money enough to cover it. That made his beating even harder for Reb Hanna to bear. Whipped by a tinhorn and a tenderfoot, showing up himself and the breed he represented! Defeat was as bitter as gall to Reb Hanna. Yet he had to take it all with good grace. He had to join in a round of drinks. He saw Len Mowery, for once showing his feelings, looking a little stunned and disbelieving as he paid Keith his winnings in yellow-backed bills.... Old Sam Royce was chortling as he accepted money from the pompous Senator Millbrook. The girl, Millicent, fluttered around Keith, beamed upon him. Maybe Bill Cody could have done better. . . . Reb made his way to the creek and ducked his aching head into the chill water. It cleared his head and his eyes, but did not help his battered spirit at all.

When Reb returned to the campfire, Sam Royce was alone. He was puffing at a cheroot and watching his daughter and Keith as the two stood before the girl's tent—holding hands and whispering together in the age-old way of lovers. Mowery, Bowen and the Senator had gone to their tents to turn in. Reb Hanna rolled a smoke, hunkered down, and picked up a burning stick from the fire.


FOR QUICK RELIEF FROM
SPRAINS AND STRAINS
MUSCULAR ACHES AND PAINS • STIFF JOINTS • BRUISES
SLOAN'S LINIMENT
What you NEED is
SLOAN'S LINIMENT

He lighted his quirly, then said, "About that cattle ranch, Mr. Royce. . . ."

"Looks like I'll be having a new son-in-law," Old Sam said.

"This will all be cattle country, five or ten years from now."

"Eh?" said Royce, taking his gaze off the lovers. "Oh, that cattle idea of yours." He shook his head. "Too risky a business for me to invest in," he added, through a yawn. "This is buffalo country, not cattle country."

He rose, muttered a good-night, and headed for his tent. It occurred to Reb Hanna that the old-timer had really meant, "You're a buffalo hunter, not a cattleman." It was evident that Sam Royce wasn't much impressed by Reb Hanna. . . .

The night was cold, but the morning warmed as the sun came up. The camp was having breakfast by a roaring fire when three Arapaho Indian bucks rode up and started to prowl around. They eyed the camp's saddle stock with the expert eyes of born horse thieves, then—to Geoffry Keith's amused smile—begged food and tobacco. Reb doled out some buffalo meat and a pound of smoking tobacco, then eased them away from camp. He felt that he had enough trouble, without borrowing any from the Indians.

It was the third day of the hunt, and the last. After another stand, camp would be broken and the whole party would head back to Dodge. Reb was glad that it was the last day, now that he could not get a grubstake from Sam Royce. He saddled his pinto, mounted, and rode out to locate a herd for the shooting. His heart wasn't in the hunt, troubled as he was over his failure to interest Sam Royce in his proposed cattle ranch, but he rode in a wide arc in search of buffalo. Once, in mid-morning, he sighted a small herd heading south. An hour later, he came upon an ancient cow in a wallow. . . . But otherwise he had no luck.

With the sun at its zenith, Reb gave up and turned back. The tenderfoot sportsmen would have to forego their last day's shoot. An hour later, Reb topped a rise perhaps five miles from the camp and saw a rider heading toward him. It was Keith on his chestnut horse, and the man was acting queerly. He swung north for perhaps a quarter of a mile, reined in and looked about, and then turned south. A little later, he was heading west again. Reb rode to meet him, and Keith, only now sighting him, came on at a hard run.

Keith was in a state of agitation. Reining in sharply, he exclaimed, "By jove, Hanna, I'm glad to see you. Something dashed awkward has happened!"

Reb waited, staring at him.

"It's Miss Millicent," said Keith. "She rode away from camp shortly after you did—and she's been gone almost four hours now. We have searched, but there's no sign of her. Those Indians, Hanna—you don't think. . . .?"

Reb was thinking, *So now you're changing your tenderfoot tune!* Aloud, he said, "Come along, and we'll soon see." He put the pinto into an easy lope, and Keith swung in beside him. They headed straight for Crooked Dog Creek. Reb said, "Funny, that girl riding off alone. . . . It's not like her. She can't handle a horse, and she doesn't even like to ride."

"I'm afraid I'm to blame, Hanna," said Keith miserably. "You see, Miss Millicent and I—well, we had a quarrel this morning. My fault, entirely. I told that I could not marry her—not honorably, I mean."

Reb twisted in the saddle to stare at him. "You *what?*" he said.

"It's so, Hanna. I'm something of a bounder, you know." Keith talked like a man needing to ease his conscience. "It's like this, you see . . ."

It was a rather incoherent explanation. Keith was actually an earl's son, but a younger son. And it was the custom in England for only the elder son to inherit title and estate. Geoffry Keith, a fourth son, was one of those peculiarly British personages—a remittance man. He had been sent to America to make his own life, but he received each month a small remittance of twenty pounds—not much for a gentleman to live on. He had traveled under false colors, socially; he permitted people to think that he would one day be the Earl of Dunleigh and a very rich man. And Millicent Royce and her father had so accepted him.

"I proposed last night," Keith said, "and I was accepted. Then I lay awake all night, troubled. You see, Hanna, I have fallen in love with Millicent—I, a fortune-hunter! This morning, I tried to make a clean breast of it, but I was ashamed and too much of a rotter to tell her the truth. I merely said that I could not marry her. . . ."

"Well, I'll be darned," Reb Hanna said feelingly. "So the girl took it to heart and wanted to get off by herself for a cry, like women do. She rode out and didn't come back." Again he stared at the Englishman. "Pardner, you sure don't savvy womenfolks!"

BACK at camp, Reb Hanna shifted his saddle from the pinto to a fresh mount, a buckskin that was a good trail horse. He also filled his pockets with cartridges for his saddle gun, remembering the three Arapaho bucks who had prowled about the camp that morning. There was a chance that a bigger band might be about, and Millicent Royce might have had the misfortune to run into them. There at the camp, old Sam Royce was riding senselessly to and fro—all within a mile

or two of the camp—and alternately cursing and praying. The self-important Senator stayed with Royce, but Len Mowery and the Army officer were off somewhere searching.

Sam Royce came riding up to Reb, and he seemed older, somehow. "Find her, Hanna," he groaned. "Find her and anything you ask for is yours!"

Reb nodded and rode out, followed by Keith. Funny how both Keith and Sam Royce had changed their tunes; now he was their only hole card, with trouble crowding them. With all his wealth, Royce couldn't name a price and buy back his daughter—from wherever she was. And Keith, growing more haggard by the minute, could not for all his superior airs find the way to the woman he loved. Reb Hanna? Reb shook his head.

"You're afraid something has happened, Hanna?" said Keith, noticing.

Reb did not answer. He was cutting for sign, and the dusty ground was criss-crossed with hoof marks; the frantic searchers had ruined all the sign. Reb cut out in a wide arc and finally found the tracks of a single horse heading north. He followed the trail a mile, then saw something he did not like.

Keith observed his frown and was bewildered. "You see something?"

"Enough," Reb said. "The girl came this way. Twice in a mile, she had trouble with her mount. She's riding that wall-eyed black, and that's bad. But what's worse, Indians are trailing her. Three of them—maybe those Arapaho bucks that were at the camp."

Keith asked in amazement, "You see all that in the dust, Hanna?"

"It's all there," Reb said, and rode on.

He traveled as fast as the cold trail permitted; at times it was obscure, and sometimes it was dim, for the constant wind kept shifting the dust so that tracks were in places obliterated. But it was clear that a woman was riding the black; a strong and expert hand could have held the black in, kept it from acting like a skittish colt. Reb knew it was the black, because he had noticed before that the animal wore a broken shoe on its right fore hoof. And the marks of three unshod ponies could only mean Indians. . . .

Three miles farther on, the tracks turned east and led toward Crooked Dog Creek. There, by a patch of scrub cottonwoods, Reb reined in and studied the sandy soil by the shallow stream. His concern turned to alarm now. The black had thrown its rider; it had run for water. The girl had picked herself up, gone after her mount—and hadn't caught it. The horse had splashed across the creek and stood for a time on the opposite bank. The girl had followed—in vain.

Reb pointed out the imprints of the girl's small-sized boots. "Follow them," he told Keith. "She lost her mount and went on afoot. I'm going to trail the Indians."

He rode perhaps half a mile, then found what he had expected to find. The Arapahoes had caught the black and made off with it; they had headed due east, and that seemed to mean that they had not turned back—at least, not immediately—after Millicent Royce. Reb swung around and took after Keith. The Englishman had lost the girl's trail. Reb found it again. The girl had been walking strongly at this point, perhaps believing she was heading in the direction of camp. But a mile

"I SHALL RETURN!"

From the depths of a watery grave came the cadaverous gun-ghost of Carson Mandry, deputized by Fate to consumate, in blood, a partnership that had been spawned in hell!

Don't miss this action-packed novel of a renegade who wouldn't stay dead—THE GUNMAN HELL COULDN'T HOLD! by Harry F. Olmsted.

Also In This Same Big Issue—

Alias the Rio Grande Kid, Bob Obets' smashing novelette of a Never-Say-Die pioneer clan. And many other blazing tales of the untamed frontiersmen who know the West.

Now on sale at your newsstand!

NEW WESTERN MAGAZINE 15c

farther on her boot tracks showed indecision. It was clear to Reb Hanna that she here had taken to wondering if she was traveling along the creek in the right direction. She had halted several times; once something had caused her to run, and she had stumbled and fallen. Reb Hanna dismounted and picked up a hairpin. He gave it to Keith.

Keith said, "Hanna, you don't suppose that those Indians—"

"We'll soon see," Reb told him.

She was not far ahead. A mile farther on, they topped a grass-topped bluff and from the height saw the girl's figure plainly. She was still gamely walking, still bent on finding her way. Reb took his carbine from its boot and fired three shots into the air. As the sound rolled across the prairie, the girl could be seen to turn and look back. But then something else could be seen. Keith cried out in panic, "Hanna, those savages!"

Reb had seen the Indians even before the Englishman cried out. They emerged from their hiding place among the high buffalo grass at a spot not far from the girl. And it was obvious that they had been watching her, spying on her. Reb Hanna saw their ponies —the black with them—some distance farther back and half hidden in a buffalo wallow. There were not three bucks now, but eight.

Reb said, "Head for the girl. Don't shoot unless you're fired on."

He lifted his buckskin into a hard run, and heard Keith coming after him. He saw the Indians scattering for their ponies. Two of the bucks suddenly halted and fired their rifles. Reb knotted his reins and gave the buckskin its head. He swung the carbine up and fired twice at the Indians. He hit nothing, but his fire sent the snipers running. Keith's big chestnut was passing him now, and it was Keith who reached the girl first. Reb slowed his buckskin and kept up a steady fire to keep the Indians at a distance. When he reached Keith and the girl, they were in each other's arms.

"Oh, Geoffry," she was saying, and Keith was whispering, "My darling—oh, my darling!"

REB HANNA growled a buffalo-hunter's oath, and shouted, "Don't stand there sparking, Keith! Get her onto your horse and get away from here. Those bucks are spoiling for a fight!"

The Arapahoes were charging in, yelling and shooting. Reb swung down from the buckskin, ran forward and dropped down behind a hummock. He took aim with his carbine, fired. He saw a buck throw up his arms and fall backward over his pony's rump. He targeted a second Arapaho, fired and wounded his man. The band then swung off, circling far back. They halted a moment, then came on again. Their rifle fire was heavy but inaccurate, yet for all their poor marksmanship Reb Hanna knew how this thing would end. He might keep them busy until Keith got the girl well on the way back to the camp, but after that. . . .

Reb fired and downed a pony and spilled its rider. But the others came on, came on so close that, despite his fire, he could see in their dusky faces all the savagery of their natures. He thought in panic, *They've got me!*

Then from behind him a rifle opened up along with his own, and Keith was there—firing in his calm and methodical British way. The Arapahoes fell back a second time, two more fallen from their ponies; this time they drew off, to lick their wounds and Reb had a notion they would not try it again.

He ran and caught up his horse. Keith was already fording the creek at a run, toward the girl who was waiting on the chestnut horse. Reb swung in beside the Englishman, and said, "You saved my life, pardner. But why in blazes didn't you and the girl pull out?"

"I say, that wouldn't have been sporting!" Keith protested. "But I did point out the way to camp and tell Millicent to ride hard. I can't understand why she didn't go."

Reb took the man up behind him, and said, as he once before had said, "Friend, you sure don't savvy womenfolks." He put the buckskin into an easy lope to catch up with the girl. "Marry her, Keith—marry her," he added. Then, on hearing Keith make an odd sound: "What's wrong?"

"Nothing, really. . . . It's just that I feel a bit unnerved. You see, old chap, that was the first time I ever was under fire. I suppose I'm a bit too civilized for as wild a country as this."

Reb Hanna laughed. So Geoffry Keith was now ready to admit that the frontier *was* as wild and woolly as he had heard. But then Reb realized that the joke was partly on him. Keith, the self-styled ordinary man, had acted like a top hand in an extraordinary situation!

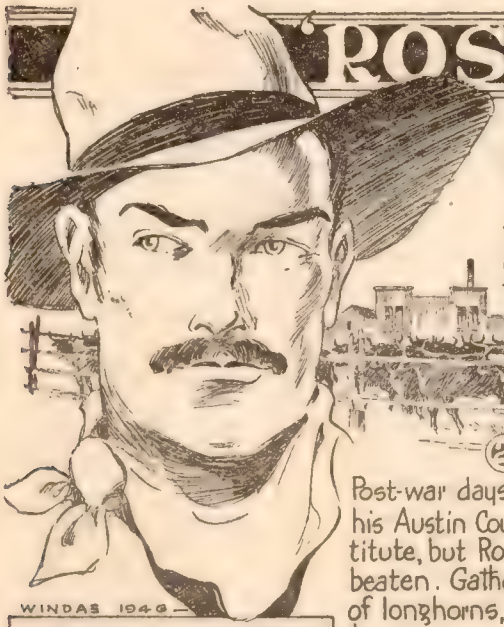
Reb Hanna was wise enough to the ways of lovers to let Keith share the chestnut with Millicent Royce on the way back, once they were out of danger of further attack from the Arapahoes. And, though he did not watch or listen, he knew that those two were making wedding plans. Keith had found the sort of game he had come hunting on the plains. . . .

Red Hanna wore a contented grin on his leathery face. For old Sam Royce had said, "Find her, Hanna—and anything you ask for is yours." And Red Hanna had heard somewhere that Sam Royce's word was his bond.

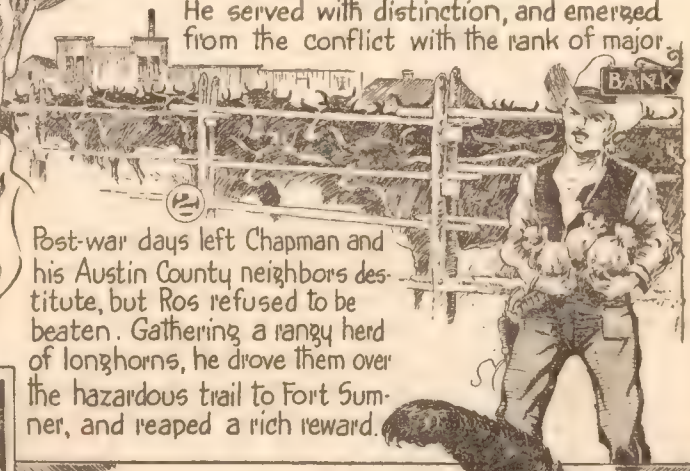
FRONTIERSMEN WHO MADE HISTORY

from the notebook of CEDRIC·W·WINDAS

ROS CHAPMAN



Roscoe Chapman was a cowboy in Austin County, Texas, when the Civil War called him to strike a blow for the South. He served with distinction, and emerged from the conflict with the rank of major.



Post-war days left Chapman and his Austin County neighbors destitute, but Ros refused to be beaten. Gathering a rangy herd of longhorns, he drove them over the hazardous trail to Fort Sumner, and reaped a rich reward.

Lured into a crooked game of poker with the notorious 'Ace' Jergen and two of his infamous card sharps, Ros won the plaudits of Danville, N.M., by annihilating that gang. He won something else, for the delighted citizens made him sheriff.

But Ros couldn't stay put. Wanderlust led him to prospecting, stage-coach driving and trapping in Arizona, Montana and North Dakota respectively. He died in 1889, badly mauled by a grizzly bear when his rifle mechanism failed.

• BLOOD-TRAIL •

Ware's pistol fired once.

John Ware had never seen the woman who had bravely put her fate in his hands. . . . Yet he knew, when he received that tragic message from Overland, that he must start his hunt for the deadly, phantom killer who was waiting to assist his search—with a bullet in the back!

Frontier Novel of a Phantom Killer

By VAN CORT

CHAPTER ONE

Cold Trail

THE old man nudged John Ware's elbow and said, "You can pull up there. That's where it was—just before the bend in the road, there."

Ware pulled up the hired team and wound the reins around the brake handle before he climbed down from the buckboard. He was a tall, hard looking man, wiry, thin-lipped and almost sun-blackened from much riding in the open. There was a sad expression in his gray eyes.

He stood for a moment in deep thought, contemplating the bend in the wheel tracks, saying nothing; then he looked up at the old man called Jeffry, whom he had hired to come out here and show him the place. "All right, you sit there on the seat like you did on the coach that day, and tell me how it happened. Tell me everything you recollect."

Jeffry rubbed his game left leg in impatience and shifted on the seat.

"Tap Walker was driving and I was riding shotgun guard. We had four passengers, three men and a woman . . ."

John Ware bit his lip. "The woman?"

"They never found the name of the woman. She had no papers or anything like that in her valise." He made a gesture over his shoulder. "She got a nice burial—back in Garrison. Her cross is marked: No Name."

Ware nodded. "Yes, I know." Memory clouded his eyes. "What did she look like?"

"She was pert and pretty; kinda small, brown eyes, yellow hair; had on a green traveling dress and a little red feather in her hat. We picked her up at Jackson Junction."

Ware said tersely, "Tell me how it happened."

"Well, we come up the grade and want to make the bend when them three fellers ride out from the rock and block our way. Right over there, it was. I remember Tap sayin' to me when he sees them: 'Cock your gun, Jeff, here comes something,' and then he cracks the whip. One of the men, the one on the right side of the road, throws down and kills the far lead horse with a sixgun. I give him a barrel and he goes out of the saddle, but the left-sider gives me a slug in the leg, and I drop the Greener. The middle man fires two shots. One kills Tap, and the other goes into the coach and kills the woman who's riding in the back seat, just as the coach turns from the fallen horse gettin' in the way."

"What did he look like? You're the only one who got a good look at him."

"I didn't. He was wearing a yellow bandanna across his face, with holes cut in it."

"What color eyes?"

"Couldn't tell, mister, but they could have been dark blue. He come riding right up past the boot, lookin' into the coach. One of the men called out, 'The lady is dead, I think,' an' he hauls up and says, 'Are you sure?' Then when Harrison, the Kansas City drummer, says after a moment. 'Yes, she's dead, bullet went through her ear,' he says, 'Well, that's too bad, I'm sorry about that,' and rides on to the back boot and cuts the money pack loose from the bundle of books and papers. Then—"

"Just a minute," interrupted Ware. "Just wait a moment. . . ." He stood looking away, out over the heat-shimmering landscape, his fists clenched. "Didn't you see anything else about the man that you might remember? Didn't you notice if he was tall or short? Wasn't there anything peculiar you could remember him by? Think hard, man!"

The old man squinted, opened his eyes wide. He straightened in the buckboard seat, looking to the left of him. "Yes," he said suddenly. "It was right here. It's like I see him now, ridin' just past me on that short-gaited, black-tailed dun. He was tall in the saddle—short-legged, I figure; and he had wide, square jaws, and a pointed chin."

"What did he talk like? What kind of a voice? Rough?"

"No, smooth, like a gambler's. He was chewin' on a dead cigar all the time—it stuck out from under the bandanna. He dropped it when he rode away with the money. We found it, and it had never been lit. He'd chewed it half through."

"Cigar," murmured Ware slowly.

"Yeah, he was a cigar-chewer; and he had dark hair, and narrow shoulders."

That seemed all Ware could make the man remember. At last he said, "All right, I guess that'll have to do. You've earned your ten dollars. Now do you mind taking the team back to town and turning it in at Decker's Livery."

They were five miles from Garrison. The oldster raised his eyebrows, suddenly interested. "You ain't comin' back with me? How you gonna go?"

"Walk," said Ware curtly. "I'm in no hurry."

"I don't figure you," said Jeffry. "Mind if I ask? The money was insured by the bank, and it's already half a year since it happened. And you say you didn't know any of the folks on the coach, nor Tap. You didn't know the woman either, then?"

"No," said Ware. "I never laid eyes on her. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"Everybody else seems to have writ this thing off the books. There's nothing you can do about it. So why are you doin' all this snoopin' around when you come clear 'way from Nevada?"

"Because," said Ware slowly, speaking as much to himself as to the other, "I'm going to find that man, and I'm going to make him suffer before I kill him."

"You'll never find him, mister. You got as much chance as if you was lookin' for a needle in ten haystacks. Anyways, I wish you luck."

WARE looked up suddenly. "All right," he said dismissingly, "I'll walk in. The team is paid for." And he stood rooted to the spot for a long time while the old man swung the horses around and drove on back toward town.

Ware sat down on a small rock by the wayside. Wind and weather had obliterated any tracks that might have been made in the hard ground. He put his elbows on his knees and sat there a long while with his eyes closed as though to force his brain to see the man who here had killed so ruthlessly for paltry money. He listened for the voice which had said, "Well, that's too bad; I'm sorry about that." He pictured a tall, sturdy-legged man, dark of hair and wide of jaw, with a pointed, aggresive chin and a cigar jutting from between his teeth. No flighty bandit, this. And his surviving companion had been found shot in the back two miles from the scene of the holdup. . . .

Ware at last took the letter from his pocket and read the firm but delicate handwriting for the hundredth time. He had never seen her, or known her. But in this third letter from her, following his advertisement in the marriage column of the paper, she had written: "Dear Mr. Ware: I start on the westward journey, then, on Monday. I have so

much to hope for; so little to leave behind. I shall try to live up to the faith you so generously seem to put in me. And I give my fate into your hands. . . ."

He pictured her: Petite, pretty, setting out courageously toward his little ranch in Nevada. She had never arrived, though he knew she had left. The ranch was now vacant, deserted.

He sat there for an hour, his face a mask, his gray eyes bleak. "I give my fate into your hands. . . ." Here it had happened; at this very spot.

"I'll find him," he muttered at last, and stood up. "I'll find him if I have to trace him clear to hell and back." And he began slowly walking the five miles toward Garrison, his head bowed in thought.

At Overland, where he arrived a day and a half later, he was due for a disappointment. Mr. Bremerton, manager of the Cattlemen's Overland Bank which had made up the money shipment, was courteously sympathetic: "Of course, the Fargo company covered us by insurance and the affair is now more or less forgotten. After all, stage and train robbing is a regular profession nowadays, with insurance as the only proper protection. . . . And believe me, the road agents know it."

Ware nodded grimly, shifted impatiently in the banker's chair. Bremerton was hefty, round-shouldered, fiftyish. He had a ruddy complexion, a soft, rather sympathetic voice, and seemed impressed by Ware's earnestness. He reached for a box of expensive cigars. "The trouble is," he said, "you're not looking for a needle in a haystack—you're looking for ten needles in ten haystacks. And when you find one you may never know whether you've got the right stack or the right needle. Have a cigar?"

Ware shook his head. "Thanks, I never went for cigars. One thing about this hold-up puzzled me: How did that man know the money was in the package of books? Somebody must have tipped him off."

Bremerton selected a cigar. "I've been thinking of that too. It had me on edge for a while, till we checked on the personnel that could have known." He looked up suddenly. "Only Graebner and myself knew. Graebner is the old cashier. . . . No, I'm afraid that angle is out."

Ware saw no matches on Bremerton's desk; he reached into his pocket, flicked one into flame with his thumbnail and proffered the banker a light.

"Sorry, I don't smoke my cigars. I chew them. Got that habit when I fought the Apache in the cavalry years ago. Cigar glow shows at night on patrol, and the smell lingers in still weather. It's a dead give-away."

Ware said, "A former cavalryman, eh? I saw service myself—in the Tenth, under Benteen."

Bremerton smiled. "I don't look it much now, do I? But I can still ride." He laughed easily. "You'll never hear a cavalryman admit he can't."

Ware was wondering how tall the other would be if he stood up. Bremerton said, "But about that book package. . . . I finally figured that whoever the man was, he must have calculated that a shipment was due—that money was bound to come through, sooner or later. After all, there were several payrolls to meet in Garrison; mines, lumber, cash money for cattle trades. . . . There were ways of reading all the sign. The book package? I think the man surmised at once that we wanted him to know that there were only books in the package. Anyhow he was no Tom-fool; he wasn't an amateur."

Ware met Bremerton's glance briefly. "You're probably right." Then he asked, "How much did he get?"

"A little over twenty-four thousand."

Ware said slowly, "A man could do a lot with that."

The banker nodded. "A smart man could; he could indeed." He shrugged and an almost sardonic smile creased his face. "God only knows how many so-called honest fortunes are started in that manner out here."

Ware chewed on his lip; he was staring at the unlit, quarter-chewed cigar turning thoughtfully between the other's teeth. "But he'll never get the blood off his hands," he said. "Never that."

"Blood," answered Bremerton, "unless it's their own, means precious little to some men."

Ware stood. "Well, I want to thank you for your time."

Bremerton rose and proffered his hand. "Quite all right. And let me wish you luck."

WARE stood outside the bank building, blinking against the strong sun. He felt defeated, completely at a loss. Ten haystacks; ten needles. Too obvious—too obvious, he thought. The man can ride, and he chews a cigar. And of course he knew of the book pack. But the handclasp; the voice. . . . And there was, of course, the bank's willingness to forget the whole affair and let the insurance company worry. . . .

He shook his head and began walking down the street. There were two livery stables in this town. That black-tailed dun had looked unmistakably like a livery horse to Jeffry and the drummer; well, he was going to have a lot of livery stables to look through. . . .

The third town, four days later, was called Willard Springs. He had made himself a crude map on a piece of paper, drawn with an indelible tally pencil. In the center was

the road between Garrison and Overland, where it had happened. He had calculated how far a road agent could ride a livery horse to do a job and then retrace his steps to return the animal and yet make an unsuspicious getaway. He drew a circle with the estimated distance as radius, then visited town after town in proximity to the circle.

The hostler blinked from his noon sleep. "The black-tailed dun? You want him saddled?"

A quick excitement hit Ware. "I want to see him."

"See him? Why, he's a good enough horse. Three dollars a day, including saddle. You'll find him out in the back corral."

The dun was dozing in the shadow of a huge cottonwood with three other horses. Ware leaned against the bars and let his tired gaze run over him. Heavy-barreled and stocky-legged, the horse was one that could carry weight and carry it a good distance. Ware stepped into the corral and hazed the horse out for a trot-around on the hard-packed ground.

"If you could only talk. If you could only talk," he muttered. This *could* be the one.

He returned to the street entrance and gave the hostler the date and the description of the man. The stableman scratched his ear. "Well, lots of hombres would fit that tally. Chewin' a cigar, eh? Couldn't say for sure about the time. But there was a hombre rode the dun lame, 'way back in September. He gimme fifteen dollars to make it square."

"What did he look like?"

"Don't recall rightly—he come in the mornin' and brought the dun back the same night. I didn't pay too much attention to how he looked. He was a tall man, not too heavy; don't think he was chewin' a cigar, but I couldn't say for certain."

"Think hard, man; think hard. Was he from here in town?"

"Oh, no. I never saw him before. . . ."

Ware walked slowly down the darkening street. The trail was petering out, if, indeed, there had ever really been a trail. It might and might not be the horse; might and might not be the man. Only the timing was right. . . .

Ware stopped at a lighted store window and checked over his map. There might be several black-tailed duns in the territory, as well as many men of this same general description. And any man who stole twenty-four thousand dollars would be smart enough to move at least a thousand miles away—certainly any man who was as smart as this one apparently had been.

Ware stood alone in the darkness, a hard, bitter-faced man. He stared again at the circle he had made on that rude map of his. Was the goal of his search inside that pencil ring, or was it outside, in any direction, perhaps a thousand miles or more away?

His fingers suddenly fought with a desire to crumple up the map and throw it in the gutter. He controlled the impulse. There was one thing he could do: He could hang around Overland and hint that he was on a trail that promised success. If anyone connected with the bank was implicated, they might show their hand. By talking to Bremerton he had played his own first card. Why not stay around and follow up? The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that his solution was inside the circle.

CHAPTER TWO

"Move On!"

THE next day's late afternoon sun spilled over the western hills, bathing the small ranch house outside Overland in its red-yellow light, pointing up the bars and uprights of the many rickety corrals and the long, sagging bunkhouse. Ware could see it had been quite a place, once. He swung his mount off the trail and down the lane where grass grew in the wheel tracks. His keen eye found no life abroad, no smoke from the kitchen end of the bunk house. He counted four horses in the corral nearest to the house; the only one in repair.

A kerosene lamp suddenly made the main house kitchen windows bloom yellow in the night and he steered for them, passing the dry pump and long, empty troughs beside the wagon shed. A long moment after he hailed the house a woman stepped out on the small side gallery, keeping her hand inside the door frame, gripping, he suspected a ready rifle.

He made his voice friendly and assuring. "My horse is dry. Could I trouble you for some water, ma'am?"

Another female figure moved cautiously to peer at him from behind a curtain, and the woman said, "I don't know you. What outfit are you from?"

The two women were alone, then. He lifted his hat and kneed the horse around. "I had no intention of intruding, Ma'am. I'm just a stranger, riding through."

Her voice caught him, almost sharply, but kind. "You're not intruding. The pump is at the far window. There's a bucket—you're welcome to use it."

Having watered the horse he relished his own drink, then rolled a smoke and stretched the saddle stiffness out of his legs. When the last of the cigarette fragrance had drifted away, the woman came out on the gallery with a kitchen bucket in each hand. He took them from her and pumped them full. She looked at him in the window light and ap-

peared satisfied, finally, with what she saw.

Inside the kitchen, which was built for a big house, he placed the buckets next to the sink. The sight of the other woman halted him. She was in a rocker by the stove, peeling potatoes, and she glanced up warily to measure him. With a dull feeling of pain, he noted her blonde hair, hazel eyes and slender figure. She did not look as if she were well; she had the nervous look of a whipped, but still spirited horse.

"Ma'am," he said, and she nodded gravely, courteously. It struck him hard that *she* might very easily have looked like this, and a thin pain knifed through him. He felt like saying something to her; and though she, too, seemed to be waiting for him to speak. He said nothing, and the moment passed.

He was at the door again when the brunette halted him once more. "It's near supper time—would you care for a little something, and a cup of coffee?"

He hesitated, then said, "You've very kind, ma'am."

When they had learned that his name was Larsen and that he was on his way to Overland on some business, the blonde girl smiled wistfully at him. "Mrs. Thornton is going to be disappointed," she said. "She was in hopes that you might be in need of a job."

Ware put his cup down. "You ladies are not running this place by yourselves, are you?"

There was a bitter, sardonic note in Mrs. Thornton's voice. "It's not being run. My husband is on a trip, trying to collect a crew; trying to find somebody who never heard of Broken Stirrup."

"That bad?" he murmured.

She said sharply, "Ever hear of a jinx? Our crews drift. Our last two hands disappeared suddenly half a year ago—they didn't give notice. There's no such thing as luck as far as we're concerned."

"Luck changes;" he said slowly, "if you change it."

She shook her head and a silence fell in which untold trouble seemed to brood, like the shadows in the far corners of the room. Something about these two women held him fascinated. Suddenly the blonde girl said, "Maybe I'm the jinx, Helen."

"Nonsense!"

"I came here because of bad luck; perhaps I brought it with me."

"Don't be childish, Lois."

"Lois?" asked Ware abruptly.

She looked at him with a start, apprehension in her eyes. "Lois Miller," she said.

He relaxed, but kept looking at her. He considered his situation for a moment; then on an impulse, he said: "My business in Overland may take some time to finish. If you could let me work more or less with a free rein, I might be able to help you out. We won't argue too much about the pay."

"Well, we do need a foreman. Could you manage that, you think?"

"I've had my own outfit; yes, I could manage it."

She brooded a moment. "No, it wouldn't be fair; I have to tell you, you'd need more than a rope and saddle to work here."

"You don't have to tell me. After all, I didn't ride clear from Nevada if it wasn't for trouble."

"Nevada?" questioned the blonde girl. "Did you say 'Nevada'?"

Ware's eyes sought her again. "You from Nevada, Miss?"

Something happened in her eyes; she withdrew inside some shell of darkness and shook her head. "No. . . . No, I'm not."

"But why would you want to work for us?" demanded Helen Thornton.

His mind was made up. His eyes were on the little blonde girl, whose name, too, was Lois. "A hunch, maybe. Sometimes a hunch outweighs a jinx."

She said, "My husband will be home in a day or so. If you're still here then, he can explain the set-up to you."

THE bunkhouse roof had leaks in it; wind whistled like ghost voices through the wall cracks, but he found a bunk that was habitable. After unpacking his scant gear he was ready for sleep. Awakeness bothered him and he went outside for a last smoke. He was about to strike a flame in his cupped hands when a rider loped out of the dark and pulled up before the house.

This man hitched loosely at the house rail and stepped quietly onto the gallery, tapping a couple of times on the door in a somehow provoking manner. In a moment the tall silhouette of Mrs. Thornton was framed in the light of the doorway.

"I want to talk to you, Helen."

Helen Thornton hesitated for a moment, then spoke to Lois Miller inside and came off the gallery, closing the door after her.

Helen Thornton said in a controlled tone, "It's no use you coming here like this, Stark. You shouldn't. I don't like it—not when Greg isn't here."

The man said bluntly: "You've got to make up your mind some time, Helen. You will eventually. As to my coming here, that doesn't matter."

"It matters to me."

The man gave vent to a quiet, overbearing laugh. "When will you have had enough, Helen? You've had a year of his failure; why bother any longer? Greg will never straighten out, he'll never make this place run—he hasn't

got it in him. Now don't be a fool, Helen."

"Stark," she said, clinging to her pride, "if I'm a fool, that's my privilege."

"Your marriage was a mistake—it's something that can't be overlooked. You're wasting your life this way."

There was a short silence, then Ware heard her say: "I don't want you to talk like that, Stark. I don't want you to come here like this again." Her voice was strung thin.

"You're weakening," he said, with easy confidence. "I've still got some patience left; things like this takes time. I know."

"If you want to come here again, Stark," she said stiffly, "come when Greg is here."

"Never mind; never mind." He chuckled. "You don't fool me with your pride. I used to know you well, Helen. I still know you."

"Don't trade on that," she said in sharp exasperation. "You'd better—"

"Helen," he said, and the peculiar deep, soft note struck Ware.

Helen Thornton said, "No, Stark! No, it's no use." There was a movement and the two figures blended in the dark. "Don't, Stark! I won't have—"

Ware stepped out of the dark and began walking straight across the yard, scuffing his soles loudly against gravel as he went. The two stiffened and the man's voice lifted querulously. "Who's there? Who's that?"

"A match?" said Ware coolly. "Have you got a match?"

Helen Thronton was trying to recover from her embarrassment as the man called Stark again demanded, "Who is this?"

She said somewhat defiantly, "Our new foreman, Mr. Larsen."

"Larsen, eh?" At once the man eyed him sharply.

In the faint light Ware saw that the man was of his own height, though not so wide-shouldered. He was extremely well-dressed in broadcloth, with a silk vest and a dark, pork-pie sombrero. A diamond pin blinked in his tie and he wore gray riding gloves. Ware could not see his face too clearly, but was jolted by the man's easy arrogance. Turning to Helen Thornton, the man told Ware offhandedly: "I don't smoke. . . ." He gave a wave of his hand in dismissal. "So you've got a foreman now, eh?"

She smarted under the derision. "Yes, and Greg is out collecting a crew—if that interests you."

He grunted. "You know what Greg is doing right now? He's emptying a bottle at O'Sullivan's, in Overland. That's how he's collecting a crew, Helen." He threw at Ware: "You're working for a drunkard, friend."

"I'll decide that, when I see him."

The man started to speak to Helen Thornton again, but Ware now cut in with a level, even tone that edged on sharpness. He spaced his words with purposeful contempt: "Mrs. Thornton doesn't want you to come here when Mr. Thornton is not at home. I think she made it pretty plain. The polite thing would be to ride."

THE man turned abruptly and looked at Ware, sharply, curiously. He was more astounded, almost amused, than angry. Gradually his expression changed to one of annoyed puzzlement. "You'll talk out of turn once too often, friend. Whoever you are, I wouldn't advise it. . . ."

Ware said evenly, "Never mind about that. You heard Mrs. Thornton's wish. You'd better move on."

The man calmly turned his back to him and said to Helen Thornton: "I'll see you again."

She was about to say something, but before she could get the words out he had walked to his horse and had mounted. He touched his hat brim briefly to her, then wheeled away into the dark. As he did so, a clatter of hoofs and jingle of bridles from the end of the lane mingled with the sound of his departure. The faint light from the rising moon showed four riders dwindling into the darkness.

Helen Thornton stood for a long moment in silence, while Ware could think of nothing but the man's figure in the saddle, his heaviness as he mounted, and the aggressive jaw. Were the cheekbones wide and the eyes deep blue? He tried to imagine how that scathing voice would sound, saying: "Well, that's too bad; I'm sorry about that." There had been no cigar, either smoked or chewed; yet somehow the personality of the man had agitated his blood; it reminded him of some one.

Suddenly Helen Thornton said: "You're quite a foreman, aren't you?"

He ignored the sting of hurt pride. "I'm sorry; I thought that was the way you wanted it."

"Do you always eavesdrop?"

"I was having a smoke, in the dark and he came riding in. I didn't like the way he acted, so I kept still."

Abruptly she swung on her heel and went into the house. "Good night, Mr. Larsen."

He was in the kitchen early, for his breakfast, finding only the girl, Lois, there. She sat down with him at the table while he had his coffee and eggs and there was a warmth in being in this kitchen with her.

A curious approving half-smile played over her face when she spoke to him. "I see you've taken over running Broken Stirrup already."

"It's not as bad as that."

"It wouldn't hurt," she said.

"Talking about taking over, who's the gent who rides the waiting line so hard, while

friend husband is supposed to be busy drowning his sorrows in a bottle?"

"You mean Stark Bremerton?"

Bremerton? *There* was the resemblance. "Brother to the banker in Overland, right?" His pulses quickened. This began to make sense. The banker's brother! The whole thing could be so obvious that no one else had ever thought of it. . . .

"He was a beau of Helen's before she married Greg," Lois was saying. "They had some disagreement or other and he went away on a journey. Meanwhile she met Greg Thornton and fell in love with him. They got married shortly afterward."

Ware could picture the man's frustration. "He didn't take that too well—Bremerton, I mean."

"They say he drank for three weeks straight, then quit and went to work. He'd never amounted to much before then; gambled some, ran a herd of cattle on the family place once in a while, and sold when the market was right . . . but nothing very much."

"But then he suddenly pulled himself together and made money—hired crews, and tried to become important?"

She nodded. "He *is* important. He's buying up all the land around here that he can get hold of."

Ware was trying to add two and two together; his brain spun. This was again too obvious—he still could not believe in it. He said, "And Broken Stirrup didn't do so well after that, did it?"

"How did you know? But it's true. Luck wasn't with them—they've had no luck since they married. They tell me Broken Stirrup was quite an outfit once—thousands of cattle, and the best horses in the valley. Greg's father bred them. Now look at it."

"You weren't here then," he said suddenly. "You never saw it like that. This isn't your home place, then?"

She was all at once very uncomfortable. "No, no it isn't; I'm just a visiting guest here, you might say." She changed the subject. "I'm a friend of Helen's, and what worries me is, what is going to happen to her and Greg? They don't get along together; they quarrel all the time."

He put down his cup and moved toward the door. "It's a rough deal, all right. Maybe something can be done, who knows?"

She shook her head slowly, hopelessly. Then she looked up. "Mr. Larsen, tell me. Why are you so interested in all this?"

Something made him say: "Maybe because of a girl."

Her eyes kept resting curiously in his, as though she were trying to learn as much as she could about this strange man; to know him. "A girl?"

Ware said flatly, "A dead girl," and opened the door. "Tell Mrs. Thornton I've gone to see the boss. By the way, my first name is John."

He heard her say, "All right," in her firm, quiet voice as he closed the door after him.

CHAPTER THREE

"You Know Too Much!"

AS HE entered O'Sullivan's establishment on Overland's Lee Street, later in the morning, a solemn, moon-faced bartender was serving a small group of riders their morning pick-me-ups. The game tables were vacant, with chairs still stacked on them, and a swamper was slowly mopping the floor. The group, tied together by small talk, took notice of Ware as he ordered a beer and asked the bartender, "Where do I find Mr. Thornton? I'm Larsen, his foreman."

Before the man could answer one of the riders called out roughly: "Upstairs, sleeping it off."

Ware rested his cold stare on the man for a moment before turning to the bartender. The latter made an indifferent gesture. "In room eight."

A hand touched Ware's elbow. "Seen you turn in here. . ."

It was the old shotgun guard, Jeffry. Ware bought him a beer. "Come down on the stage to show the new driver the road," said Jeffry. "How you doin' with that business of yourn? I got kind of interested since talkin' to you. There's still a five hunnert re-ward by the insurance company."

Ware took stock of the oldster. "Good enough."

"Then I figured I was kind of a friend of Tap Walker, I guess. You set me to thinkin'. Weren't enough bein' done about this thing anyway."

Ware volunteered, "I found the blacktailed dun. At Jones's Livery, in Willard Spring. Ever been there?"

The oldster shook his head.

"Tell you what," said Ware. "I'll hire you to go down and check on it; if it *is* that blacktailed dun, we're a little closer. Maybe the man is right around here. You keep looking for an hombre of the description you gave me."

"I been doin' that. You think he's right around here?"

"It's possible." Ware put significance into his voice.

"I'll keep my eyes peeled." The man studied Ware knowingly as though he were trying to guess his thoughts. "I'll be seeing you then. How about meeting me right here day after tomorrow night?"

Ware nodded and the man went out and Ware turned toward the back stairway. As he passed the group at the other end of the bar one of the men deliberately stepped backwards and placed a leg in his way and there was a slight collision. Ware stopped; the man turned around, an insolent, purposeful grin on his face: "Want to make anything out of that, stranger?"

Ware perceived the movement behind him too late. One of them had lifted his gun, while another was at the door, bolting it. The bartender had vanished. Suddenly, remarkably, they were all gathered in a loose circle around him.

The man who had tripped him was obviously in charge of the others. He had a look of some intelligence despite the brutish expression of impersonal, professional hatred with which he regarded Ware. There were six of them in all. Time was getting short.

The man was about to make some remark when Ware moved forward and kicked him viciously on the shin. Then, shifting his stance, he rammed a straight right into the other's nose. It happened with such lightning speed that for a second all interest was on the victim, who buckled up, clutching his blood spurting nose and his leg at the same time. This second Ware used to take a swing at the man next him. The man crashed against a chair-stacked table, taking it to the floor with him. But now the others were closing in slowly, relentlessly.

Ware moved in a maelstrom of slashing, hammering fists, head down, trying to protect himself. His head slammed against the wooden railing of the bar and he ducked away. His path was blocked. He traded punches with the blocker, but all around him could see nothing but cold, merciless faces. They were old hands at this kind of a game; some of them were holding back while the others caught their breath.

One eye was closing; his ribs flamed with pain as something crashed against the side of his head, spinning him against the bar. Someone kicked him in the groin and he sat down on the brass rail, shaking his head. He clawed his way up again and caught hold of the nearest man's belt with both hands. Hanging on, he swung the man in a circle, tripping two others. That gained him a three-second respite.

"Get him! Get him!"

He moved back and forth a few steps, his hands searching along the undershelf of the bar. Then he had it—the sawed-off Greener shotgun of the bartender's. He swung up from under the mahogany and commanded the room in a deadly sweeping gesture.

"All right, all right," he panted. "Back up—all of you."

SLOWLY they moved back, and Ware stood there, gasping for breath while blood trickled down his face. One of his eyes felt like an enormous bee sting. His thumb held back the hammer of the shotgun. "Whoever took my gun, put it back on the bar here!"

A man came forward and with a sheepish grin and replaced the weapon. "All right, son. Now I want you to tell me who gave you the orders for this business."

The man who had tripped him said, "Never mind, never mind; this doesn't settle anything. . . ."

The cavalry sergeant's voice came out of Ware. "Shut up! You mean you're ashamed to tell me you work for Bremerton? All right, deny it."

The other studied him rancorously. The beating up had had the aspect of a more or less routine piece of work; now Ware had become to the man a puzzle he could not quite understand. "Pretty smart gent, aren't you?"

"Maybe," said Ware. "Anyhow, don't get in my way again. Now get out of here." He jiggled the shotgun. "My thumb's getting tired. Step lively, boys." He herded them out in a body, coming from behind the bar and covering them from the swing doors as they mounted. He saw them ride to the end of the street and swing out of sight. Still, this gave him satisfaction. Could Bremerton be showing his cards so soon?

Back at the bar he found the ice bucket and a towel and gave his face a going over. Climbing the backstairs with aching knees he encountered, at the top landing, a bleary-eyed man in shirt sleeves. His hair was disheveled and a hairy chest showed inside the unbuttoned shirt. Suppressing a yawn, the man proffered a hand.

"What goes on?" he demanded in a sardonic tone. "Who are you to chase the great Dullaghan at the end of a barker? May I have the honor?"

Ware, with a long-bred distaste for shaking hands with drunks, pushed past him. "Where's Room 8?"

The man swung round and came after him, suddenly steady, poised. "What do you want in Room 8?"

A door was open on the murky corridor and Ware walked in, opened the blinds and waited for the other.

"I said, what do you want?"

In the light, Greg Thornton was pleasantly handsome. He was tall, somewhat narrow-shouldered, but well set up. A pair of direct gray eyes fought with weakness and debauchery in a face that could have been strong. Ware studied him and considered carefully before he said, "I'm Larsen, your new foreman."

"Never heard of you," Thornton said.

"Your wife hired me."

Thornton shrugged. "My wife takes a lot of notions."

"I came to find out if you had any orders you wanted to give me."

The other reached under the bed and produced a half full whiskey bottle. Pouring a heavy slug into a water tumbler, he downed it quickly. "Hair of the dog that bit me; want one?" Ware refused and he went on, "Orders? You seem to be getting into trouble easily enough on your own hook."

"Who said I started it?"

"Well, you pick the wrong trouble with the right people, all right."

"What's right about Bremerton?"

Thornton was at the wash basin, dunking his head, mopping his face with a wet towel. "I didn't say. You're full of answers, too, aren't you?"

Ware said slowly, "If you don't want to hire me, say so."

Thornton had straightened up and was watching him keenly while he buttoned his shirt. His eyes narrowed. He said, "Don't jump to conclusions. Let's talk about this some more."

"Make up your mind."

"All right, you're on."

"I'll get to work hiring you a crew then. I understand your beef is spread all over hell at the moment."

Thornton chuckled bitterly. "How long do you think a crew lasts at Broken Stirrup?"

"Maybe we can fix that."

Thornton pulled on his boots and jacket. He nodded darkly. "Try again, try again." He reached for the bottle. "Let's drink on it."

Ware reached out and took the bottle from him; without a word, he heaved it out of the window and heard it land with a dull crash in the alley below. "Later," he said.

WHITE-HOT rage spilled from Thornton's eyes; he flushed, his mouth falling open in speechless anger. Ware held his gaze steady, his expression never changing, his face a bitter, frozen mask. They faced each other in silence for a long moment; then the breath seemed to go out of Thornton, and he said in a strange tone: "You're tough, aren't you?"

Ware's gaze became distant. "Not from choice." He opened the door for the other to precede him out of the room. "Let's go over to the hotel and have some coffee. This place stinks."

Thornton gave him a quick look and picked up his hat. "All right," he agreed matter-of-factly.

As they passed Olivero's Mexican barber shop on the way to the hotel, Reid Bremerton, the banker, turned out of the door, running a hand over ruddy, newly shaven jowls. At the sight of the two men he removed a quarter-chewed cigar from his teeth and pointed it jovially at Ware's fast blossoming black eye as he smiled innocently.

"You seem to be fond of our town, Mr. Larsen. My brother keeps a rather rough and tumble crew. Watch them—there's apt to be some bad numbers among them." He chuckled. "Well, here am *I* talking, and according to reports, the trouble was all theirs. Just the same, I'm sorry about it. I don't like a town to take that trend. Tell me, how's that detective work of yours coming?" He seemed to be watching Ware from behind the smile, now.

Ware was making a smile too. "Oh, that? I've taken a job, now." His eyes were once more going over the cigar and the jowls.

Bremerton said, "I see. I guess anyhow that's better than ten haystacks, eh? Well, good morning. Good morning, Greg."

Ware watched the man march down the street, short-gaited, energetic. There was enough of the cavalryman left to show. He turned to Thornton. "You think *he'd* ever kill for money?"

The other chewed on that. "Make it enough money, and you can't tell about any man." Thornton was suddenly watching him keenly.

"Would his brother?"

Greg Thornton's face hardened. "Stark would never have to bother; he's never had to bother about anything. He was born with a deck of stacked cards in his hand and he's been dealing and raking in ever since. But then again, as I said, you can't tell."

"Except once he didn't make the game," murmured Ware.

"Meaning what?"

"The girl married *you.*"

"Damn you, man!" exclaimed Thornton. "You know too much."

Ware opened the door to the hotel's dining room. "On the contrary. I know too little."

Fifteen minutes later, while Thornton was in the midst of his breakfast and Ware smoked over a cup of coffee, a clatter and rattle shook the little plaza outside. Greg Thornton made a gesture. "See what I mean? That talks louder than anything *I* can tell you."

A cavalcade of men had streamed into the area outside the bank, led by Stark Bremerton, who was flanked by a rider on either side. Behind and ahead of him riders mounted on horses branded with a crossed B deployed, distributing themselves along the hitchrails, and the sidewalks and saloon galleries suddenly became flooded with Bremerton men.

Bremerton and the two men with him dismounted by the courthouse and began mounting the steps, the hirelings falling slightly behind the employer, in the manner of a gen-

eral officer's retinue. Bremerton was impeccably dressed and booted; his shirt gleamed whitely, with the diamond on his expensive tie blinking icily in the sunlight. The man stopped momentarily on top of the steps and surveyed the town as he pulled off his spotless gray riding gloves, and Ware, despite himself, was somewhat impressed by the figure he cut.

"Ever in the army?" asked Thornton. "I'd bet on it."

"Both of the Bremertons were," answered Thornton. "Oddly enough, though, Stark never had a very good seat on a horse. Too tall in the saddle. But look at that damned empire builder—look at him strut! In the last year he's bought more cattle and more land than is good for one man; he keeps three crews, big crews. Any range that is not used he moves in on, and he pays top wages." He snorted. "Where do you think my crews go when that kind of money is around? Why, he's even now pulling to bring in the railroad. . . ."

"The point is," said Ware, not taking his eyes off Bremerton till the latter was inside the courthouse, "where does he get it? Crews and cattle take money."

Thornton shrugged. "His brother is a banker." He challenged suddenly: "In the face of this flood of Empire, do you still want to work for Broken Stirrup? Do you still want to try to collect a crew and gather up my strays to build a herd?"

Ware nodded slowly. "I do."

Thornton said, "This is a mighty tough job. You're a strange bird, Larsen. I don't quite figure you. How do you come to be here—what's really your stake in this?"

"I came," said Ware evenly, "to find a man, and to kill him."

THORNTON was watching him closely. Meanwhile Bremerton had reappeared on the courthouse steps and was preparing to cross the plaza. "I'd hate to be in the fellow's boots once you find him," remarked Thornton.

"One thing puzzles me," said Ware. "Bremerton, knowing from last night that I was working for you, surprised me by setting his crew on me. That's outright trying to stop you from hiring men. It's not subtle enough; it's not according to his policy of competition with you."

"Unless you stepped too heavily on his toes last night. Or there may be some other reason—something else."

Ware said, "I'm counting on that last card."

Thornton asked, "Meaning just what?" but Ware did not bother to answer. He was staring at the old man, Jeffry, just now standing at one of the courthouse steps, watching Stark Bremerton mount his horse a little below him, following the man's every move and gesture. Something in the shrewd oldster's attitude made Ware's pulses pound a little faster. Maybe we'll lick that job yet, he thought. Was this the right trail, after all?

Thornton paid the colored waiter and they prepared to leave. "What are your plans?"

"Look for men to hire," answered Ware. "Then file notice with the sheriff's office that we'll be hunting strays on all county ranges; probably your cattle are breeding calves for other men right now. We'll file the names of the men to rep for us as we hire them. We may even hunt strays in a bunch, for mutual protection."

Thornton smiled oddly. "You'll find it tough, hiring men. I wish I had your enthusiasm."

"One point," said Ware. "What about money—have you got money enough to keep a crew a while?"

Thornton considered. "I got money all right; Bremerton, however, is paying forty-five. I can't go much over thirty-five."

"We will, for a while," Ware said. "Take the difference out of my pay."

"That the way you want it?" And as Ware nodded, Thornton shrugged and added, "Well, suit yourself. I wish you luck."

They were in the lobby and glancing into the ornate, elaborate saloon opposite the dining room, which obviously catered to the wealthier set in Overland. Ware saw Stark Bremerton at the bar with his two retainers, obviously foremen, engaged in leisurely talk over a glass of wine. On an impluse he said, "Let's go in and have a glass of beer," and Thornton followed him uneasily.

Ware with his black eye, and Thornton showing the effects of the previous night's drinking, made an odd contrast to the empire builder and his men, who were extremely well-dressed. Ware picked a spot where Bremerton could not help noticing his presence.

"I believe you've met my foreman, Mr. Larsen," said Thornton curtly.

Bremerton looked with small amusement at Ware's eye. "You've changed," he said, "since we met."

Ware chose to laugh as he studied the other. "As they say you should see the other fellow—or I should say, fellows? Incidentally, I wish you'd keep your dogs off me." He laughed again. "You know, when dogs get too annoying, people sometimes take shots at them."

Bremerton appeared unruffled, even slightly amused. "Don't hold me responsible for your getting into trouble with people. You seem to have a knack for speaking up at the wrong moments." He turned to Thornton. "Believe

me, Greg, I have no intention of intimidating your employees. But I'm expanding my holdings, and I need men. Don't be surprised," he added in a jocular, yet half serious tone, "if I turn around and try to hire Mr. Larsen away from you. Mr. Larsen seems to have, shall we say—well, a talent for 'handling' people."

Thornton, obviously conscious of Bremerton's visit to his ranch in his absence, shrugged darkly and maintained a tight-lipped silence.

Ware said laughingly, "I guess I wouldn't be interested. I'm not too interested in money."

"What are you interested in?"

"People—people who are *too* interested in money."

Bremerton chuckled. "You're hiring a strange crew, Greg. I wish you luck." But underneath the manner Ware saw the man studying him keenly. His mouth had a willful drag to it, somehow resentful. His way of looking at Thornton revealed that not for one minute did he forget that the other had married the woman he considered his. Yet Ware had to admit that close up Bremerton was not an unpleasant looking man—that he was even handsome, in a way.

Thornton said, in answer to the last remark, "Well, I'm satisfied with it." He emptied his beer glass and turned to Ware. "Let's go out where the air is fresh," he said.

They almost bumped into Dullaghan in the doorway and the latter moved out of the way with caution. He had seen them talking to Bremerton and appeared puzzled.

"Well, now you've done it," said Thornton as they walked across the plaza. "If you didn't have the dogs after you before, you will now. Stark is a vindictive man. Your life won't be worth a two-bit piece in this town from now on."

"Maybe I figured on that."

"You figured on it?" Thornton's voice was irritated. "Why did I bother hiring you, then? A dead foreman isn't much good."

Ware walked toward his horse. "I'm not dead yet. Well, I'll get busy. See you in a day or so."

As he stepped into the saddle, Thornton suddenly came up and took his horse by the bit. "What is it you're after Stark Bremerton for? His brother referred to some detective work you were doing. Stark is the man you're here to kill, isn't he?"

"He could be." Ware bit his lip. "Somebody held up the stage between here and Garrison half a year ago, robbed a payroll, and killed the driver and a woman passenger. She's buried in Garrison." He kneed the horse away. "Well, I'll see you."

And then he was riding away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Back to Broken Stirrup

AS WARE swung around the corner several blocks away, heading for the bank, he turned and got a last glimpse of Thornton vanishing into O'Sullivan's establishment. A moment later Jeffry came round the corner of the saloon and entered the place too.

At the bank a day later, Ware cast out a piece of bait.

Reid Bremerton showed polite interest: "Well, that's fine," he said, "that you're getting somewhere; frankly, I've never suspected that the man would be right here around town, but there may be something in what you say. Anyhow, I wish you luck. The insurance company will certainly be glad to hear about it."

Ware considered the man as he spoke his next sentence. "Another matter. . . . Your brother more or less offered me a job yesterday. Would you consider there was any future in it?"

Reid Bremerton studied his cigar. "There might be, and there might not. Stark was always one for suddenly getting streaks of ambition and then dropping things again."

Ware looked in vain for the Bremerton riders who had accosted him the day before at O'Sullivan's, when, after some business at the sheriff's office, he rode past several Crossed B men on his way out of town. Caution and a certain curiosity had made him decide to spend this night at the Thornton ranch since he saw Thornton nowhere in town. He was following a trail through an arroyo to a river crossing when he pulled rein and cast a speculative glance about him. Ahead of him a rider had appeared, and sat saddle waiting for him across the trail. It was Dullaghan.

"I would like to see," said the man with a hard-bitten intensity, "what you can do without a Greener in your hands. The odds are even now." He prepared to dismount. "Well, are you man enough?"

"*Are* they even?" said Ware, and looked swiftly about him. "As for what I can do, your nose and shin ought to be able to tell you that."

The Bremerton foreman reddened. "To hell with you! We'll settle this once and for all—or are you too yellow?"

Ware put his hand to his gun and prepared to ride past. "You take me for a damned fool, don't you? I should spar with you with a damned pack of dogs at my heels? Tell that boss of yours he's short on brains." But even now he had the feeling that the game was lost, that he was in some kind of a trap.

Dullaghan spurred forward a little, his face flushed with stubborn anger. "This is per-

sonal with me. Throw your gun away and we'll see who's the best man." He kneed his horse into Ware's and jumped from the saddle, shoving Ware in the chest.

At that moment, as Ware's skittish horse jumped nimbly out of the way, there came the whistle of the rifle bullet, with the report immediately on top of it. Dullaghan lifted his arms with a jerk, groaned, and fell heavily to the ground.

Rolling out of the saddle, Ware fired in the direction of the sound, expecting other shots from all directions. A bullet splintered his saddlehorn and he fired again. He expected to die at any moment, but no more shots came and Dullaghan's mount finally stood still. Ware then heard the distant poundings of the hoofs of a third horse somewhere on the tree-scattered rolling range land above the arroyo.

He walked over to Dullaghan, unable to understand why they had so easily given up their chance. The Irishman was breathing laboredly, staring stupidly at Ware through glazed eyes. "What the . . ." he gasped. "Who—who. . . ." Then he suddenly lay still and became immobile with an unmistakable laxity.

Ware went back to his horse and climbed into the saddle. "I'm getting close now," he thought as he headed very slowly back toward Overland. "Maybe too close." He gave up the thought of going to Broken Stirrup for fear of bringing trouble with him. But he had to find his man quickly now, before there was any more striking in the dark. The situation was getting a little too tight for comfort. One thing left him in a quandary: Was the shot that killed Dullaghan aimed at the Irishman or at himself? Was it a mistake? And if so, where would the rest of the Bremerton men be? Yet the description of the road agent could fit Bremerton well enough. The cigar meant nothing. A man could easily use a cigar to change his voice and confuse others. But another thought bothered him now: Was it a coincidence that the last two Thornton cowhands had disappeared half a year ago? Half a year ago. . . .

Early evening shadows were lengthening when he reached the end of town and hitched his horse at the bakery rail. His first quest was to learn from someone, through indirection, the whereabouts of his man. The town was still filled with Crossed B men and he realized suddenly that it must have been payday for Crossed B.

He walked down the street in the dusk and by sheer chance caught sight of Jeffry at the corner of Yucca, apparently on the lookout for someone. Ware walked up and tapped the man's elbow and the oldster jumped to face him, his mouth breaking open.

"I was looking for you," Jeffry said.

"Thought you'd be in Willard Springs, checking on that horse," remarked Ware.

The shotgun guard's eyes narrowed shrewdly. He glanced about him. "Ain't necessary no more." He was breathing hard and a kind of nervousness agitated him. "I found your man, I think. There can't be much mistake about it."

Ware was about to speak of his experience, but there was too much traffic. They could not talk here. "Where is he now?" he asked.

Jeffry came close to him. "We got to act cautious. Better go somewheres we can talk, if we aim to trap him right." He indicated O'Sullivan's. "I got a room upstairs; we can take the back entrance." He started down the side alley toward a small door and Ware followed him.

O'SULLIVAN'S, at night, was a different place from the one Ware had seen in the daytime. Clatter rose from below as the two men ascended the backstairs to the corridors above. A large crowd was at the bar, players were at the game tables, and girls circulated encouragingly among the customers. In the back of the room was a small stage and someone was killing a song with a rusty soprano, accompanied by a fair piano. There was continual laughter and stomping of feet, shoutings of orders to the bartenders and an occasional crash of glassware.

Jeffry walked with nervous steps to a door, rattled a key in the lock and swung it open. The room was dark; he stood aside to let Ware by as he fumbled for a match in his pocket. "I can't see," Ware said. "Light the lamp first."

The man hesitated, then walked in and stood at one side of a small table. After a moment he struck a match which he shielded with both hands. Ware stepped inside and closed the door after him and in that moment, as the shotgun guard fumbled with the light and left them in darkness again, he knew that there were three of them and not two in the room.

Throwing himself on the floor to use the table as shield, he clawed for his gun. The man in the corner near the window fired twice at him, one bullet searing his side, disconcerting him momentarily. Jeffry, in the middle of the room, yelled, "Wait—wait, for God's sake!" The yell suddenly died into an inarticulate groan as he crashed down over the table.

Ware's pistol fired once at the blurred shape before the window. There was a dull crash as someone smashed through it, taking sash and glass with him, the flimsy frames splintering like match sticks.

Ware rose groggily and staggered to the window in time to see a figure running in the dark toward the back alley. In another

second he would have turned the corner and be out of sight. For sheer luck Ware leaned out and fired. He saw the figure spin and stagger against the house wall before he rounded out of sight.

He spun from the window to dash out of the room for the stairs, but the pain in his side made him dizzy, and he halted.

A bottle stopped his foot and he bent down and pulled out the cork and took a long drag. He struck a match and found the overturned lamp, the flickering light spreading over the pale face of Jeffry on the floor. All was quiet in the room.

Ware knelt by Jeffry and turned his face to the light. "You old fool," he said with uncontrollable bitterness. "You were walking me into it and you got it yourself. . . . Well, who was it? Was it Bremerton? Tell me!"

The shotgun guard opened his eyes slowly. His shirt was sticky with blood; a weak hand fumbled in a coat pocket.

"Who was it?" Ware demanded again.

There were suddenly several large bills in the fumbling hand. "Paid me . . . well . . ."

"Who was he?"

"Knew . . . when . . . you told me look . . . this town . . . made him pay . . . ."

"Was it Bremerton?"

But Jeffry was dead.

Ware stood up and let out his breath heavily; he took another pull on the whiskey bottle and went outside.

He went down into the alley and stood against the wall for a moment, trying to collect his thoughts. Avoiding the main street, he went back to the baker shop and found his horse. By a roundabout way he rode to the courthouse and saw a light in the sheriff's office. A deputy on duty was just preparing to make a round of the town.

"I'm looking for Mr. Bremerton, Stark Bremerton," said Ware casually.

The man finished buckling on his gunbelt; he suddenly looked sharply at Ware. "You're Larsen, aren't you? Thornton's foreman."

Ware nodded. "That's funny," said the deputy. "Bremerton may be looking for you right now. . . . Word came in that Ray Dullaghan was found dead out near the Sandy. There was some talk about going out Broken Stirrup way to look for *you*."

"Thanks," said Ware, and went out. The lawman suddenly called after him, "Hey, wait a minute!" But Ware was game.

BROKEN STIRRUP seemed deserted as he approached, but as he cautiously swung around the house he saw that there were lights in the kitchen and the bedroom.

Ware mounted the gallery, knocked, and entered the kitchen.

The two women were alone in the kitchen; they turned, startled, preoccupied, as he came in. Water boiled on the stove; Lois was busy tearing a sheet into strips while Helen Thornton held something in her hand behind her back.

"Oh, Mr. Larsen! I'm so glad you're here," said Lois with relief.

Ware shifted his glance to Mrs. Thornton. There was a flaming red mark across her cheek, as if someone had slapped her hard with a back hand; her hair was slightly disheveled. He made his voice as mild as he could. "What seems to be the trouble?"

Helen Thornton spoke, between short gasps of breath, trying to cover her embarrassment, "Greg got into some sort of difficulty—through drinking, I guess. He's—he's in the bedroom, sleeping it off. . . ."

Her voice faltered and trailed off. She was following Ware's glance, which, led by her inadvertent furtive glances, had sought the floor. A trail of stippled red led from the outer door to the sink and from there to the hall door.

"Better let me see him." Ware stepped toward the hall door, suddenly cautious and catlike, every sense fully alert. Helen Thornton opened the door. "I'll show you. . . ." But he took her gently by the arm and moved her aside. "Better keep back . . . please."

"But why?" she demanded, suddenly frightened. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"Just keep back." Ware walked to a door. Thornton's voice called, "Come in, Larsen."

Ware saw Thornton, reflected in a bureau mirror, lying on his back in the bed, his hands down along his sides under sheets and blankets. He walked in then and stood at the foot of the bed, thinking of his long hunt and of his strong hatred; and as he stood there it blossomed again into a cold, righteous fury. Yet he was calm. He said, "Bleeding much?"

Thornton tried to smile but did not succeed. "Too damned much."

Ware said, "Jeffry told me everything—he'll testify against you."

"Jeffry—he's a damned liar—he . . ."

"A liar about what?" asked Ware grimly.

"Jeffry gave me the money you paid him to trap me."

"The old . . . fool. I thought I . . . got him in that room."

There was a slight sound of stealthy footsteps in the hall outside, but Ware was beyond paying attention. He said, "Piled up quite a record, didn't you? Old Jeffry, Dullaghan, Tap Walker and Lois Stevens, the girl in the coach. . . ."

"The girl. . . . That was too bad. . . ."

"But you wanted the money." Ware's voice was bitter.

"Yes, I wanted the money."

"How-come you knew where it was?"

Thornton labored for breath. "Watched . . . them load . . . so often . . . couldn't fool me. . . ." Suddenly he groaned sharply and exclaimed with pain. "Somebody do something . . . somebody get a dotcor . . ."

"You'd rather hang, then?" Ware stepped nearer to look at the wound. "That girl was on her way to Nevada, to marry me."

"Larsen," said the dying man, "I won't miss you this time."

THERE was swift movement under the blanket at Thornton's left side, but not swift enough. Ware ducked as the bullet roared past his ear and slammed into the wall. Cursing, Thornton fired again and again as the women screamed in the hall. Ware saw Stark Bremerton dash into the room and pounce upon Thornton. Ware got to his feet and helped him and between them they subdued Thornton.

Thornton looked from one to the other; his lips moved, his eyes rolled wildly. Then suddenly blood showed on his teeth, running over his chin in a thin stream. In a moment, he was dead.

The two men straightened up on either side of the bed. "You heard?" Ware asked laconically, and Bremerton nodded, mute.

Helen Thornton was in the doorway, bewildered, on the verge of hysteria. "I never thought—never thought he'd—he'd—"

Bremerton put his arm about her and led her away. "You've had a tough time, Helen. Let me take you to Reid's house."

In the yard, Bremerton gave soft-spoken orders to his men for the removal of Thornton's body to town. Ware hitched a team to the buckboard for Helen Thornton.

Bremerton said to Ware: "I had him under surveillance for a long while, but because of Helen I hated to think he did it. When you showed up I could not make you out. I thought you were in with him. I'm sorry about that trouble at Sullivan's—I was trying to feel you out."

Ware smiled grimly. "Forget it."

At the time for departure, Lois Miller demurred at going with Helen. "I'd rather stay here at the moment," she said emphatically. "I don't ever want to see Overland again."

After a moment Helen Thornton gave up trying to induce her and the two women embraced. Shortly afterward the house was empty, and Ware and the girl sat alone on the gallery, looking out over the vacant yard.

"Are you going back to Nevada?" the girl asked him, after a while. He thought about it for a long moment, considering the emptiness of it and the emptiness in him at the moment. His hunt was ended, but it had brought him nothing. He regarded the girl, his thoughts jumbled. He did not know what he would do. "There is not much joy in going back alone," he said finally. "Perhaps I might stay here a while. I don't know."

"It would be nice if you could, perhaps."

He said, almost abruptly, cutting swiftly through all the things that were on his mind, "Would that please you? Would it mean anything to you? I would like your friendship."

"I'm a lonesome girl," she confessed slowly. "To know you better would mean a lot. I liked you when you first came riding in here."

There was a silence in which he felt something new grow in him; a hope, a belief in a future that might not be so empty after all. He would stay here a while and run this place for Helen Thornton. The girl said, a peculiar catch to her voice: "I heard you say in there that the girl in the coach was traveling to Nevada, to marry you. . . ."

"Yes?" he said, and felt his heart pound.

"I started for Nevada once. I never got there. . . ."

"No?"

She went on, with some difficulty: "A day or so before we reached Overland I made the acquaintance of a girl in the coach. She was nice to me; I guess we started speaking because we looked a little bit alike. . . ."

"Go on," he said breathlessly.

"In Overland she took me to O'Sullivan's Salon and Hotel, telling me it was a respectable place. I was dead from the journey, and it was night. While I slept she stole my clothes and what little money I had—my valise, everything. . . . I—I guess she took the stage out of town at once. . . ."

"Good God!" said Ware, rising to his feet.

"After I had slept a few hours, I awoke in the room, alone . . . then a man came in. I—I fought him off. Later he came back; there was no lock on the door. I fought my way past him and ran down the backstairs. I was frightened to death. I ran through the alleys . . . out of town . . . just to get away. Helen, found me on the road. . . ."

Ware was at her side, gripping her hands. She was crying softly.

"You're Lois Stevens," he said.

She nodded at him. "Yes. . . . John Ware."

He put a protecting arm about her. "You poor kid. . . . God, what a time you've had." He suddenly fumbled in his breast pocket for something. "I have your last letter here. I carry it with me. You said in it—"

"I remember: I give my fate into your hands . . . or something like that." She was able to smile a little.

They sat after a while in long silence, listening to the soft sounds of the night. Once he said: "You'll like Nevada. Nevada's a beautiful place. . . ."

THE END

Today we have potato chips and fish and chips and chips off the old block. . . . But in the rip-roistering days of old Kaycee, Adolph Ensley introduced his famous delicacy, "Buffalo Chips," and devoutly wished he hadn't after he realized what would happen when—

THE CHIPS WERE DOWN!

"We'll fill your order without delay."

By "CIMARRON" GEORGE BOLDS

IN the late seventies there was a combination saloon and eating establishment on one of the busy streets in Kansas City known as Adolph's Place.

Adolph was a Dutchman who for years had been feeding customers at twenty-five cents per meal. In those days it was breakfast, dinner and supper. If anyone had suggested dinner around six or eight, they'd have thought him crazy.

Adolph had been serving his customers meat from those old Texas longhorns and it was pretty tough. Adolph then got his first bright idea. It was to give his customers something new—namely, buffalo meat. This proved a great success, and his business began rapidly to expand.

One day, while slicing steaks from the hump of a buffalo bull, Adolph saw that he had a large hunk of very lean meat. Adolph then got his second bright idea. He watched his meat cutter preparing the steaks from the hump

and ordered him to slice it in the form of chips. In that way one pound would do for three servings, and would triple his profit.

Adolph then gave birth to his third idea. He gave to these slices the name of "buffalo chips" and raised his prices to fifty cents and trimmings for a meal. His bill of fare now had only one meat on it, and that was the exciting new delicacy, buffalo chips.

The news about Adolph spread like wild fire, and instead of losing customers at the new price, his business more than doubled. Buffalo chips became so popular at Adolph's place that fights often occurred for seats at his tables.

Now, with the demand growing, Adolph could not get enough humps to supply his customers, so he used any slice from the carcass of a buffalo and still called it buffalo chips. Adolph was so surprised at his success that all he could think or talk about was buffalo chips.

Adolph's new dish became the talk of the town. Finally he had to hire extra help to care for his expanding clientele. He personally scoured all the slaughtering places and bought all the lean cuts of buffalo meat he could find.

Then the meat began getting scarce and Adolph started to worry. He bought all the buffalo meat in sight and became so popular, eventually, that his grateful customers nicknamed him "Buffalo Chips." He liked it. He was getting one dollar and fifty cents for a pound of hump that only cost him fifteen cents. Adolph had accidentally discovered a gold mine!

All Adolph ever thought or even talked about was buffalo chips. The first thing strangers to town wanted to know was where they could buy buffalo chips. Adolph's business was booming beyond all expectations.

Bill Emery and Ed Smith had come to Kansas City with a shipment of cattle from the Hardy Ranch in western Kansas. After delivering the cattle, they stayed two days to see the town. On their way to the depot to get a train home they stopped in at a saloon for a last drink. It happened to be Adolph's Place.

Neither of the two had ever heard of Adolph's Place and they knew nothing of his serving meat from the hump of the buffalo and calling it buffalo chips.

Adolph served them personally, then, seeing that they were strangers, he asked, "Any chance of picking up some buffalo chips out your way?" They thought he was crazy—or trying to josh them. However, Emery said, "Some."

Adolph said: "Then you boys are a Godsend! Now here's my proposition. I want a ton of buffalo chips and will pay five hundred dollars for them sacked and delivered to any express office along the Santa Fé line."

Smith grinned. To his pardner, he whispered: "Humor him. He's loco, but we don't want no trouble with our guns in our luggage back at the depot."

Adolph said happily: "Have another drink. I kind of had a hunch you boys could supply me with some chips."

Emery then said: "We're in a hurry to catch a train home, Adolph. We don't know you, nor you us. So you'd better write out an order saying that you will pay Bill Emery and Ed Smith five hundred dollars for a ton of buffalo chips, to be delivered to the express office in Dodge City within two weeks from this date. Also, you are to send the money to Bob Wright, a merchant at Dodge, and when we deliver him the express receipt, he is to pay us the five hundred dollars. Wright knows us, and in that way we will fill your order without any delay."

Adolph wrote out the order and signed it "Adolph Ensley." After he had handed it to them, he said, "Now have another drink," and then insisted on them taking the bottle along to use on the way home. He then added: "If you're not in a hurry, why don't you sit down and try a portion of buffalo chips? It would be on the house."

They gazed at him a moment and then both said hurriedly, "No thank you!" and left.

WHEN they were on the train, Emery reread the signed order and commented: "That fellow Adolph is either a damn fool or crazy as a locoed steer." Smith remarked, "If he wants buffalo chips so damn bad, why in hell don't he come out here and pick 'em up? I'm not going to be the sucker."

Emery replied: "I know, but what if he sends the money? We can hire some fellows and have the chips at the Express Office, all sacked, inside of two days."

Smith was still sore at the Dutchman for wanting him to eat buffalo chips, and said, "I'll not do a damn thing until Wright has the money. We won't go down to the ranch for a few days. We'll just wait around and see what happens."

Three days later they were in Wright's store, laying in supplies before leaving for the ranch. Bob Wright spotted them and asked: "What kind of a skin game are you two up to?"

"Why, not any," they both replied innocently.

Bob then told them he'd received five hundred dollars from a fellow in Kansas City to be handed over to them upon presentation of a receipt from the Express Office showing they had consigned a ton of buffalo chips to one Adolph Ensley, in Kaycee.

Emery pulled the contract from his pocket and handed it to Bob. When Bob had read it, he frowned and said: "Something must be

wrong. No one can be that big a sucker and run a restaurant."

Smith remarked: "He means it all right. He even wanted us to stay there and eat some of the damned stuff!"

Buffalo chips, of course, are the droppings from the buffalo. When rain and sun eventually causes disintegration of the mineral matter, a dry, flat chunk of vegetable matter is left, usually about the size of a plate. These plate-like chips often were used as fuel.

Well, the upshot of all this was that Emery and Smith hired two wagons and four men, and in a single day had the ton of buffalo chips gathered and ready for sacking.

After having the chips weighed in at the Express Office, the two punchers were given a receipt for "one ton of buffalo chips," consigned to Adolph Ensley at Kansas City. Then they almost ran to Wright's place to get their money.

Wright said: "You've filled the order all right, but what in hell they are for is what gets me. I want to suggest just one thing to you two robbers. Leave that order here and I'll keep it in the safe. Maybe it will keep you out of jail."

Adolph was jubilant. He enlarged his ice house to take care of the buffalo chips the minute they arrived. Finally, when the Express Company notified Adolph to send a dray around to pick up one ton of buffalo chips, he was in his glory. He had put one over on all the other eating places in town—or so he thought—and now had a supply of chips that did his heart good.

Adolph heard a commotion out back of his place, and went out to investigate. He saw the drayman piling up sacks against the building, and yelled angrily:

"Stop! Those buffalo chips must go in the ice house."

The drayman grumbled, "Don't see what you want 'em in your ice house for—they'll spoil all your meat."

"Spoil, hell," cried Adolph excitedly. "That's five hundred dollars worth of buffalo chips you're handling, so go easy."

The drayman remarked, "A hell of a price to pay for a ton of this," and untied one of the sacks. It was then Adolph saw what he'd bought. For a moment Adolph was too stunned to speak. Then he began cussing.

After he'd calmed down some, he wired Emory and Smith at Dodge for his money back, but they were not known there. Then he wired Wright, asking whether Wright had paid the money to Emery and Smith for the buffalo chips.

Wright wired right back, "Yes," and sent it collect.

Adolph took the first train for Dodge to find Emory and Smith. Wright informed Adolph that the boys had properly filled his order and that he had no recourse. Adolph then inquired the way to the Hardy spread, hired a horse at the livery, and started for the ranch, thirty miles to the south.

When he was about twenty miles out, he stopped two men to ask if they knew the way to the Hardy Ranch. "We do," the two told him, "but you're not going there." They then robbed him of his watch, his gun and all his cash. All he had left was a ticket back to Kansas City. The outlaws tied him to the saddle, finally, and started his horse back to town.

WELCOME, KILLERS!

If the grizzled old law-dog had survived that bloody shoot-out, he could have told *why* he had invited a likable killer and a notorious honkatonk queen to visit hate-hot Skull Valley.

Action-Packed Novel by Tom Roan
And 9 other top yarns in the April issue—
on sale March 13th!

10 STORY WESTERN 15c MAGAZINE

WHEN he arrived back home he was about the maddest Dutchman ever known. He'd lost his five hundred dollars and now, adding insult to injury, outlaws had robbed him of all his loose cash. He promptly hired a lawyer and ordered him to bring suit against Bill Emery and Ed Smith for five hundred dollars and one thousand dollars damages for ruining his business. The lawyer informed him that a cowboy never had that much cash, and that he might as well drop the whole matter.

Adolph retorted: "You do as I tell you. I'm paying the expenses." So the lawyer, with visions of a fat fee, brought the suit in Ford County, Kansas, as Adolph had ordered.

When the Dodge sheriff received the summons for Emery and Smith he filed it away, as he knew they were due in town before the day of the trial. Later, when they arrived, the Sheriff called them to his office and read the summons to them. The two punchers were indignant. They told the Sheriff they had filled Adolph's order to the letter.

The Sheriff advised them to see Mike Sutton. "He's a good lawyer, and you boys sure are gonna need one bad to keep out of jail."

I personally will add here that I know Mike Sutton very well, and that he is one of the best lawyers who ever practiced in the West. He knows all the ropes and can be relied on as straight and honest. He kept me out of jail twice, so maybe I should admire him!

When Mike read the order for "one ton of buffalo chips," he asked, "Did either of you fellows know what Adolph wanted the buffalo chips for?"

"No," they both replied.

Mike then said, "Well, you must appear here on the date set for trial. When you come, bring Hardy or some other rancher that knows what buffalo chips really are."

On the day of the trial Adolph was there with blood in his eyes, accompanied by two lawyers from Kansas City. This case had attracted a lot of attention and the courtroom was jammed.

When the case was called, one of Adolph's lawyers stated: "My client gave an order for one ton of buffalo chips, to be used at his eating place. The defendants, Bill Emery and Ed Smith, shipped him one ton of what we might say is fertilizer. We are asking for the return of the five hundred dollars paid them, plus one thousand dollars in damages."

The court then ordered the first witness to the stand—Adolph Ensley. Adolph stated he had given Emory and Smith an order for one ton of buffalo chips and paid them five hundred dollars for the shipment. The lawyer then produced a buffalo chip, handed it to Adolph and asked, "Is this a sample from the shipment you received?"

"It is," said Adolph furiously.

"Now will you kindly tell the Court what you call 'buffalo chips', and in what way you use them?" the lawyer continued.

"I slice the meat from the hump of a buffalo," Adolph testified, "and serve it as 'buffalo chips'. I gave these slices the name buffalo chips myself, as it helped my business."

The lawyer then asked, "Did you tell Emory or Smith what you wanted the buffalo chips for?"

Adolph hesitated a moment, then admitted, "No."

The lawyer was so taken back by this answer that he said, "Your Honor, we rest our case."

Emory and Smith, when placed on the stand, both testified that they had no idea what Adolph wanted the buffalo chips for. Mike Sutton then handed the Judge the original order for the chips, after which Hardy was placed on the stand.

Sutton handed him the sample chip the plaintiff had shown in evidence and asked, "Will you kindly tell the Court the name of this sample you have in your hands?"

"Buffalo chip." he replied promptly. Two other witnesses were placed on the stand and they both stated it was a buffalo chip, also.

Adolph was furious. "These witnesses are fixed!" he cried. "This is against public sentiment. I want justice. I won't stand this."

The Court told him coldly: "You mention public sentiment. Well, this room is jammed with all classes of people, some of them in the same business you are in, so I will leave this question for public sentiment to decide."

The Judge then said: "You have all seen the sample shown to this court. I want all to stand up who are sure the correct name of this sample is a buffalo chip."

Every one in the room was instantly on his feet.

Adolph jumped up before his lawyers could stop him and yelled, "It's not justice! I'll kill Emery and Smith for robbing me!" and started to pull a gun. The Sheriff quickly disarmed him, but he still acted like a crazy man.

The Judge then ordered the Sheriff to bring Adolph before the bench. "I'm fining you one hundred dollars for contempt of court," he announced sternly. "Furthermore, I'm entering judgment against you for all costs, in addition to one hundred dollars for the cost of the defendent's lawyer. You will pay this or go to jail. Take your choice."

Adolph's lawyers demanded a new trial, but were overruled. Adolph arranged for the necessary payments, and returned home a much wiser saloon and restaurant man. But he still would continue selling buffalo chips, he vowed —if he could get the right kind of chips!

HIGH-GRADERS' HEAVEN

In Goldfield's boom days, high-grading ore was big business. . . . For in that hectic, hell-roaring time, everything that glittered *was* gold!

By CORPORAL JOHN Y. QUAYLE, Jr.

A STIFF, no-limit poker game was running one night in Tex Rickard's Northern Saloon in Goldfield, Nevada, during the height of its boom. Down on his luck, one player went broke and pushed back from the table, saying:

"Hold my seat, boys. I'll be back."

Leaving the Northern, he waited in the dark shadows of an alley behind a crooked assayer's office. Soon a miner came stumbling down the alley, a heavy ore sack on his back.

The poker player jammed a stick into the miner's back and commanded: "Reach!"

Dropping his sack, the miner ran. The poker player picked up the sack and took it to the assayer's office. A few minutes later, he was back in the game with twenty-seven hundred dollars cash he'd received for one sack of high-grade ore!

Old Nevada desert rats swear that story is true, although twenty-seven hundred dollars for one sack of ore is possibly an exaggeration. But there never was a camp where high-graders got such rich loot as they did in Goldfield.

Most high-graders were five dollars-a-day miners working in such rich vains as the Combination, Mohawk, Red Top and Jumbo, where ore ran as high as fifty to one hundred dollars a pound.

While not all assayers connived with the high-graders, it is estimated that Goldfield had at least sixty who did, cutting themselves in for fifty per cent "commission."

At first, the high-graders contented themselves with taking out chunks of the rich ore in their pockets and lunch boxes. Then some bright lad got the idea of wearing two shirts sewn together at the bottom, and filling them with ore. Others wore canvas vests complete with pockets from top to bottom. Called "corset covers," these were worn under shirts and could be bought in Goldfield clothing stores.

They worked, too. Billy Cunningham, who ran the Oriental Saloon, told of one five dollars-a-day miner who deposited $1,133 in his safe in eight days.

Tex Rickard claimed at least one million dollars was high-graded from the Goldfield Consolidated Mines Company alone during 1907. And official reports backed this up.

Once Claude Inman, a Goldfield constable, heard miners quarreling with an assayer.

After trailing the men to their shack on Pearl Street, Inman arrested them, recovering nine hundred forty-seven pounds of ore!

"Change rooms" were established in the mines hardest-hit by the high-grading fraternity. In these rooms, miners were forced to strip to the skin and change their clothes before going on and coming off shift.

Tough Al D. Myers, Goldfield prospector who found the Combination Mine with his partner, Bob Hart, heard that high-graders were operating in the Mackenzie lease, looting an underground vault of ten to one hundred and fifty dollars a pound ore.

There's a leak in that underground vault of yours, Mac," Myers told Mackenzie.

"That's impossible!" declared Mackenzie. "That vault's guarded night and day. No high-grader could get near it."

"But they are," Myers insisted. "How about the guards?"

"They're as honest as you or me."

"Well, Mac," smiled Myers, "I'll just bet you the price of the ore you've got in that vault right now that the high-grade has been replaced with low-grade."

"I'll take that," snapped Mackenzie.

The ten tons of ore then in the vault were taken out and assayed. The average was one dollar a pound—"company ore."

Estimating that five hundred thousand dollars had been stolen from his "impregnable vault" under the noses of his "trustworthy" guards, Mackenzie payed off his bet to Myers.

"What are you goin' to do now, Mac?" Myers asked him.

"Hire some new guards," Mackenzie replied, "and maybe fill some new graves!"

• • RIDE WIDE

The girl with the spitefire temper and hair-trigger shotgun told Jack Boyle he could tell Nick Burton to go to hell. . . . Which, by a grim coincidence, was exactly why Jack had come to Wolf Rapids, and probably why he would never ride out of there—except head down, across his saddle!

By
ART LAWSON

CHAPTER ONE

Shotgun Welcome

WHEN Jack Boyle saw evidence of life in the little old shack he turned his horse in that direction. His pack mule quit following, a fact which Jack knew to be a bad omen. She just stuck her dainty hoofs deep in the soft loam and flattened her ears against her head. But Jack went ahead, more wary than usual, with a hand near the holstered Colt Peacemaker he always carried. He went almost up to the open doorway and then stopped, because both barrels of a shotgun gaped at him.

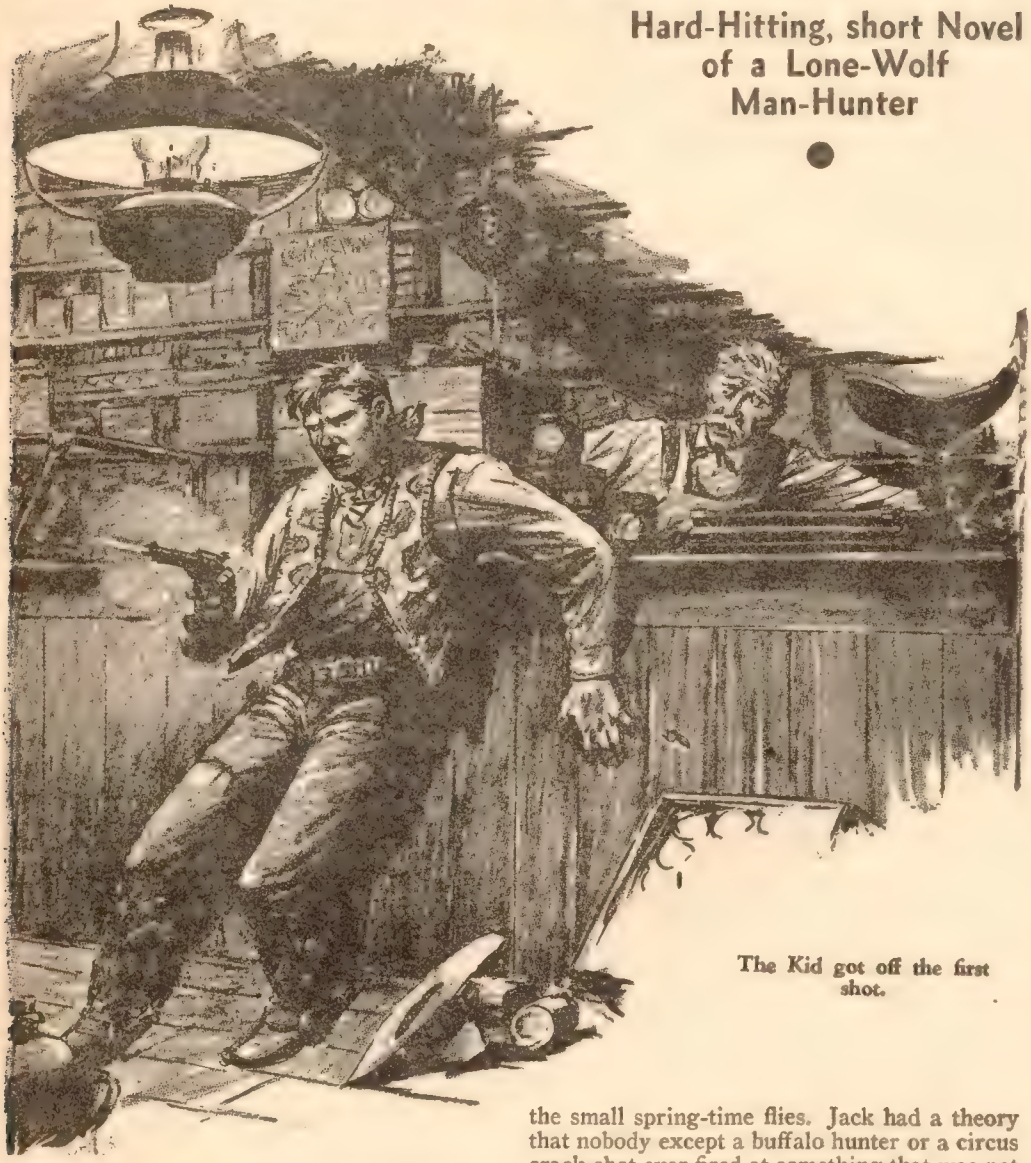
"Pardon me," Jack said. "I'm looking for a place called Wolf Rapids."

"It's down-crik from here," a voice said. "Drift."

Jack Boyle did not drift. The late afternoon sun was in his eyes and the dark interior of the shanty kept him from seeing the person holding the shotgun. But the voice told him

OF WOLF RAPIDS!

Hard-Hitting, short Novel of a Lone-Wolf Man-Hunter



The Kid got off the first shot.

almost as much as his eyes might have told.

"What's the trouble, Miss?" he asked.

"Git!" the girl said. "I'll count three. Then—"

"Go ahead," Jack Boyle said. "I got flunked out of kindergarten before we got around to sums. I wouldn't know what countin' to three meant."

"One—" the girl began. "Two—"

Jack Boyle sat his horse without motion while the big roan idly flipped its tail about at the small spring-time flies. Jack had a theory that nobody except a buffalo hunter or a circus crack-shot ever fired at something that was not moving. He believed that even a crazy gunman would not shoot at you, unless you gave him some sort of excuse.

The girl said, "Three!" and Jack began to grin. He was a good-looking hombre. He had blue eyes and black hair that already showed a streak of premature gray. His mouth was big and used to laughing.

"Well," he said, "if you've finished your sums why not come out and get acquainted? Boyle's the name. Jack Boyle."

The muzzle of the shotgun wavered. It was moving back and forth in a little arc, very slow, and by the movement Jack knew that the girl was holding it tight against her side and that her breathing was causing the motion. Jack considered taking the gun away from her. It was not right, in his estimation, to let a girl like this tote around a shooting iron.

He kept on talking to her. "Now that we're acquainted and everything, I'm pleased to meet you," he said, "and thanks for the invitation. I don't mind if I do light down and rest my saddle."

Very easily he slid to the ground and stretched, taking a deep breath. He was a good six feet tall, taller looking in tight blue Levis and high-heeled boots and big Stetson. The tab of a Bull Durham sack danced outside the pocket of his red shirt when the evening breeze touched it. Then he moved suddenly, knocking the shotgun from the girl's hand.

He heard the hammers click as he tore the shotgun from her grasp. But there was no explosion. The gun dropped on the dirt floor of the shanty, and Jack Boyle felt like a fool.

The girl was crying. Her hands were over her bowed face. Long, silky black hair curled below her shoulders, completely masking her in this gloomy place. She was sobbing silently, her slim body shaking under the emotion.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It's just—well, I get uneasy when somebody aims a shotgun at me. That's a fact, Miss—"

She flung her head back. Her eyes were bright with tears, but her rather full mouth was hard now.

"You knew I was out of shells," she said. "Nick Burton must have found out somehow. You wouldn't have dared come at me like that if you hadn't known."

Nick Burton! So he was at the end of his long search at last!

She sure was a pretty little thing, Jack thought; wilder than a mountain lion. She was wearing a boy's shirt and pants that were too small for her, and no shoes, but her short nose was tilted defiantly.

"So I'm one of Nick Burton's boys," he murmured. "Well, a feller's never too old to learn, I always say."

His eyes had become used to the gloom in here. He saw the girl's face take on an uncertainty momentarily. Then the old defiance was back in her eyes again.

"You tell him to go to hell," she snapped.

Jack laughed at that. She would not break. She would never tell him a thing. He knew that now, and he admired her spirit.

"I sure will," he promised, and there was a hardness in his voice suddenly.

She squared off before him. "Now will you go?"

Jack took one good look at her, frank and appraising, and she stood up against it. He nodded slowly.

"Sure," he said. "You dropped somethin', Miss," he added, and picked up her shotgun and handed it to her. He glanced around the one-room shanty. Home-made furniture, shelves, no food, but a copper pot shining as if lighted from within. The place was immaculate, and it had the good clean smell of the earth to it. It was a nice place—and about to fall apart. "Take it easy," he told her, and stepped outside.

His horse nickered softly. But the mule still hung back at the edge of the timber.

THERE was a bridge across the river at Wolf Rapids, then the town. The town was a row of false fronts on both sides of a rutty street that was hock-deep in dust which even the spring rains hadn't settled. The town looked about as worn-down as that shanty of the girl's. Only the bridge and river seemed rugged, permanent.

By light of a dirty coal-oil lantern Jack saw a sign: COMPLETE STORE. He went in. A bell tinkled as he opened the door. Only one light burned in the store, near the rear, a Rochester lamp that hung over a counter where a little gray man worked on a big ledger. He was grumbling to himself as Jack's heel-taps sounded down the sawdust aisle between stacks of farming implements, clothing, and groceries. He did not look up at first.

"How they expect a man to keep in business when they never pay their bills is more'n—"

"Mister," Jack said. "I'm a cash customer. Look."

He put a twenty-dollar bill under the man's nose. The man almost fainted. He picked up the bill, studied it carefully.

"My God," he said.

When he glanced up his eyes were a pale, watery blue. The twenty-dollar bill trembled in his thin fingers.

"I want to buy some stuff," Jack said. "You got a delivery boy?"

"No," the old man said. "But, my God—twenty dollars?—I can get one."

"That's fine," Jack said. "Rastle me up twenty dollars worth of groceries. Coffee, canned peaches—you know, all the stuff a feller might need. Salt."

The old man stuffed the twenty dollars into a pocket. He lighted a lantern he had hanging on a hook behind the counter and began to collect the stuff. Jack got a can of tomatoes and a can of peaches for himself, opened them and began to eat with his knife blade. Helping himself to crackers out of a barrel while he ate, he began to feel better. He watched the pile of groceries growing beside him, and could almost feel wings sprouting on his wide

shoulders and a halo popping out of the top of his Stetson. He began to feel so good he wandered around the store looking at what little he could see in the poor light. Then the old man came over with his lantern.

"I got it," the storekeeper said. "Anythin' else?"

"Sure," Jack said. "A box of twelve-gauge shotgun shells. Buck and bird, half of each. And—are them dresses?"

"Ayah," the old man said.

"That's fine," Jack said. "I'll take one."

He lifted one off the rack. It was too big. So was the next. Then Jack turned to the old-timer and said: "I want one like this—" He motioned with his hands. "For a girl about this high, this big around."

The old man looked baffled. But his eyes had begun to shine.

"Settin' up housekeepin'?" he asked. "I remember when Annie and me first set up housekepin'. . . ."

"Get the dress," Jack said.

The old-timer fumbled around for a while, finally found a dress and held it up against himself. It was blue, all right, and damned pretty, and just about the right size.

"That's it," Jack said.

Together they went over to the counter. The old man was excited. "This'll be extra, of course," he said.

"Why not?" Jack felt very generous. He paid for it. The old man was folding the dress. Jack said: "Up-crik ten-twelve miles, other side of the river, there's a black-haired girl. I don't know her name. Send this stuff out to her." The old man quit folding the dress to stare slack-jawed at Jack.

Jack said: "Well—what in hell's the matter?"

"I can't do it," the old man said. "Nobody'd go out anyway. Here—take your money back."

He tugged at his pocket.

"Who says you can't?" Jack asked.

"Take this money," the old man begged. "Please! And then go away."

Jack mentioned the name the girl had used. "Nick Burton?" he asked softly.

The old man was waving the money at Jack. "Please! Get out—before we're both in trouble."

"Keep your shirt on," Jack said. "I'll go find us a messenger boy."

CHAPTER TWO

Messenger from Hell

THERE was a saloon next to the Complete Store, then a building that looked like a church. Next to the church was a restaurant boasting, "Best Damn Food This Side of Heaven." Beyond the restaurant was a feed shop that had an air of prosperity, and across from it forty horses crowded a saloon hitch-rack. That was the place, Jack decided.

He hitched horse and mule to the feed store rack, then shuffled through the dust of the street to the saloon. Inside a piano was thumping and a woman was singing in a high voice, notable chiefly for its power. She came to the end of her song just as Jack pushed through the batwings and stepped inside. The crowd howled approval of the song. The woman was standing on a platform near the battered piano. She spotted Jack in the doorway and screamed:

"Welcome, Stranger?"

Jack tipped his hat to her. She was pretty, in a way—had been at one time, anyhow. And she was not as big as you would expect from the volume of her voice. She looked rather seamy to Jack. She started another song.

No one else appeared to have noticed Jack. They let him belly up to the bar where a short, fat man, his sleeves held up by a pair of woman's pink garters, was busy swabbing the mahogany. This saloon had been a very elegant establishment in its day, Jack decided. The wide mirror at the backbar was cracked in one corner where a bottle had hit it during a brawl. Above the backbar someone had worked out a sign with bright stone or glass against dark wood. It read: CRYSTAL PALACE.

The bartender greeted him. "Got some rum, Mister, right up from Jamaica."

"A double bourbon," Jack said. "From a new bottle. Neat."

The bartender's fat round face wrinkled up like a small boy's when he's lying to the preacher.

"Now, don't talk like that. This is a straight place, Mister."

"I know it is," Jack said. "After the bottle bring me Mister Nick Burton."

He spoke very slowly and distinctly. The bartender's face changed abruptly into a broad smile.

"Why, certainly. Yessir, right away, sir," he said.

He fetched the bottle, opened it, and set it in front of Jack. He drew a short beer and set that there, too, with a second, smaller glass. Then he went down to the end of the bar and leaned across it to whisper somehing to a man Jack could not see because his reflection was in the cracked part of the mirror.

There was movement through the crowd. In the mirror Jack followed the man's back out the door. Jack poured his drink. He worked on it slowly. It was good whisky, the best he'd had in some time. He rolled it over his tongue, let it slip down his throat drop by drop. He held it on his tongue until it evaporated. He wondered why anybody bothered with chasers

or spoiled their bourbon with ice and water.

A man nudged him on his left. The man had just come into the saloon and was making himself a place at the bar. Jack eased over, but another man was getting in at his right. Jack tensed.

"Lookin' for Nick Burton?" asked the man at his left. He was a dark-faced hombre with the corner of a silver badge showing under his open vest.

"Yeah," Jack said. "You Nick Burton? I'm Jack Boyle."

"I'm Nick Burton," spoke up the man at his right.

JACK turned slowly. He looked at Burton in the glass, first, then straight into his eyes. He did not like anything he saw in Nick Burton; the man who, some years ago, had run his father to the wall. Burton was almost as tall as Jack, but much heavier. There was middle-age weight to his waist, but his shoulders were those of a wrestler. It was his eyes that Jack liked the least. They wrinkled at the corners as if he was perpetually sneering, and had the cold color of a fish's.

"Didn't mean to put you out," Jack said slowly, "but—" The other man was helping himself to Jack's whisky. The bartender had brought spare glasses. Nick was reaching for one of them; his expression held nothing to encourage Jack to go on. "I hear you're sort of big boss in these parts," Jack continued. "And you're the feller I should see to get a messenger boy when I need one."

Nick Burton poured a drink. For all the evidence he showed that he was being talked to, Jack might as well have been discussing his problem with a hitching post.

"The problem is this," Jack went on. "There's a little lady lives up the creek, ten-twelve miles, other side of the river. I bought her some groceries today, at the Complete Store. The old guy down there says I got to get one of your boys to deliver the groceries."

Jack was beginning to sweat up above the band of his Stetson. Neither of these men had crowded him from the first instant, nor had they paid any attention to him since their original greeting. Poker-faced, they finished their drinks.

Then Nick Burton said: "Hear that, Joe?"

Joe used a phrase that was not "Sure did" but meant the same.

Jack became aware of the fact that the music had stopped. The room was silent. Even the clicking of glasses on the bar had ceased. Then there was a shuffling sound and in the mirror Jack saw the singer coming through the crowd toward the middle of the bar where he stood between Joe and Nick. She was not as old as he had first thought, and her blondness was genuine, he guessed. He was rather surprised that her bare-topped dress swept down all the way to the floor. Usually these honkey-tonk girls wore short, fluffy skirts. But this one, he saw quickly enough, was no usual one. There were three short up-and-down wrinkles just above her straight nose, and her mouth was tight as she halted about a foot to one side of the group and tapped Nick on the arm.

"Nick!" she said.

Nick leaned over the bar. "Gus—" he said. "Send somebody down to the Complete to run an errand for Gramp. Send the Kid." His fish-like eyes moved to Jack. "That want you want?"

Jack nodded. "Thanks!"

Nick moved one step back to turn and face the girl. "What do you want, Rose?" he asked, and his voice had lost its harsh tone of authority.

"I was saving you a dance," she said, giving him a professional smile. "Remember?"

"Why, sure," Nick said.

The girl lifted her fan. The professor began to beat out a fox-trot. The crowd made an open space for Nick and the woman, and the couple danced away gracefully. Obviously they had danced together often before.

Jack paid his bill at the bar. The time had come, he decided, to look after his horse and mule.

THE street seemed very dark after the bright lights of the saloon. It was quiet, and the restless movements of the horses at the hitch-rack and the subdued beat of the Crystal Palace piano emphasized this quietness rather than disturbed it. It was a quiet that seemed unnatural to Jack Boyle, that made him hunch up his shoulders as if to protect the back of his neck from a thrown knife.

Since he had not yet passed the wagon yard, he knew it must be at the other end of town from the direction in which he had come. All these little cowtowns had a wagon yard, as well as a couple of saloons. But Wolf Rapids' wagon yard, Jack quickly discovered, was a thing of the past. Half of the high fence had fallen in and the rest had burned down, apparently when the barn had caught fire. It must have been a fine blaze, too, because the cottonwoods on this side of the street were all dead. Somehow those cottonwoods symbolized the whole town to Jack. It was a town he wanted to put behind him; he wanted to forget it. That is, as soon as he was finished with Nick Burton.

He made his decision quickly. He rode back through town, a still, quiet town, to the smoky lantern before the Complete Store. There was no horse, no rig of any sort at the rack, so Jack decided Nick Burton's boy had not yet shown up. But when he stepped up to the door

he found out he was wrong. Back there in the dim rear of the place an argument was going on. A young man with a high-pitched voice was shouting at the storekeeper.

"I want cash for this stuff. Hear me? I want cash."

The storekeeper made some kind of an answer—Jack could not hear what it was—and the young man began shouting again.

"You'll give me cash for this stuff, or by God, I'll break you up bone by bone!"

Jack stepped inside. The bell over the door jingled and the argument suddenly stopped. The kid's face was flushed as he turned to Jack. He was slight—about sixteen, Jack thought. He did not appear to be drunk. But he was flashily dressed, with a vest of spotted cat, a snakeskin band on his Stetson, and a pearl-handled pistol in tooled holster at his thigh. Jack noticed that the hostler was tied down wih a buckskin thong.

This kind of kid could be mighty dangerous; worse than an experienced gunman, even, because you could never tell what he might do next. He was scowling at Jack, who could not remember having seen him at the Crystal Palace. When Jack came into the light the kid stared at him briefly, then turned back to the old storekeeper.

"Okay, Gramp," the kid said. "Wait on this *paisano,* and hop to it. I ain't got much more time to waste."

Gramp's thin lips trembled, and his ragged mustache twitched. He was trying to get up his nerve.

"This—uh—*paisano,*" he finally muttered, "is the hombre who bought this stuff."

The kid's body stiffened. His head turned in the manner of a mechanical doll, and his eyes narrowed. He looked as if he had smelled something very foul, and if he had not also been so really dangerous, Jack would have laughed at him. He was completely arrogant.

"What's the idea?" he asked.

Jack ignored him. "This the boy," he asked Gramp, "that Nick Burton sent down to deliver the groceries?"

"Says so," Gramp said.

"Listen, fella," the kid snapped. "I asked you what's the idea?"

Jack Boyle still spoke to Gramp: "Then why ain't he takin' them?"

The storekeeper shook his head unhappily. "You can't buck Nick Burton," he whined. "I told you you couldn't. You just can't buck Nick. Look, I'll give you back the money—"

The kid was jittery as a locoed horse. "Listen to me, fella," he said. "I asked you twice before. What's the idea of buying all that stuff for my sister?"

The old man began to make little bleating sounds. Jack turned slowly to the kid. At first he was not sure that he had heard right. This kid's eyes were blue, and he wondered if the girl's were blue, also. In that dusky shack they had appeared black, like her silky hair. This kid was just a little taller than the girl, and Jack realized suddenly that she had probably been wearing his old clothes.

"You were trying to trade this stuff back for cash when I came in," Jack said softly.

The kid's eyes twitched. He was still stiff-backed. He had guts, of a sort; you had to give him credit for that. He had the same sort of guts that his sister had, and maybe the rot that was in him was something that could be whittled out like the rot in a tree.

"Gramp says this stuff is for us," the kid said. "Says a stranger bought it. So why can't I cash it in? I got a perfect right to it."

The kid's crazy logic had some sense to it, in a twisted way, but now he was becoming rattled, just as Jack had expected he would. He was letting his fingers inch down toward the pearl-handled Colt. He could not wait for Jack to continue the argument.

"You and my sister," he said, "what have you and my sister been up to?"

The old man was muttering painfully. Jack was thinking of that girl back there in her shanty, barefooted, hungry, dressed in this kid's cast-off clothes, standing up to him with an unloaded shotgun, prouder than hell and all its devils. He was thinking of that as he looked into the twitching eyes of his kid.

"I'll tell you," he said very softly, very easily, "when you're old enough to understand."

Then he slapped the kid very hard on the face.

He slapped the boy because there was insult in a slap whereas there would not have been insult in a blow of the fist. A man would slap a boy when the boy is bad. But a man would never punch a boy.

The slap stung Jack's fingers; it staggered the boy up against the counter where the groceries and supplies were stacked, knocked a couple of cans of tomatoes off onto the floor.

The kid swore spitefully. Still against the counter he reached for his pearl-handled pistol; and his speed was the one thing on which Jack had not calculated. This kid was phenomenally fast. His gun sight had cleared leather long before Jack's fingers even touched the cedar butt of his own Colt.

CHAPTER THREE

The Kid Delivers

JACK BOYLE had not tied down the tip of his holster with a throng, as professional gunmen do. So Jack's holster twisted forward when he tried to draw and his pistol snagged. He was still tugging when the kid fired.

That bullet missed Jack. The kid had been in too cramped a position for a good shot; but now he had gotten the feel of the pearl handle in his fingers, and he aimed carefully. He took too long.

Jack threw himself forward, sweeping out with one long arm at the stack of groceries on the counter. He knocked a couple of these off onto the kid, then the whole pile.

A can spun in the air, squirting juice and bits of smashed peaches about the room. The kid let out a yell. Jack got his hands on a sack of potatoes and bashed the youngster over the head with it. Then he wrenched the fancy pistol away from the boy, and stood back, brushing himself off, waiting.

The kid, dazed, pushed the groceries out of his way but made no effort to stand. Jack covered him with his own gun.

"Pick that stuff up," he snapped, "and pick it up fast."

Slowly, the kid got up. Something had happened to him that he did not believe was possible. He had been beaten at his own game, licked by a man whose gun had snagged so badly that he had been, to all intents and purposes, unarmed. It was a bitter thing, and the blue eyes were darkened with the bitterness. Right now the kid looked younger than ever—much too young to be toting a .44 calibre Colt in a tied-down holster. Sullenly he started picking up the canned goods.

"Uh-uh!" Jack chided.

The boy had been calculating his chances of heaving a can of corn at Jack and getting his pistol back. Jack had seen the kid's hands tense on that can, and now the kid put it on the counter where it belonged. Jack loosened his own pistol. A little twig had dropped into the holster, binding it. The kid was only half way through his chore when spurs rattled outside and half a dozen men came into the store. Nick Burton was not with them. But the hombre named Joe was there, and Joe's marshal's shield was in plain sight, pinned to his galluses. Up in the Crystal Palace his vest had hidden most of the bright metal.

Joe stopped just inside the doorway, letting a couple of his men shield him.

"What in hell's goin' on here?" he roared.

Jack was surrounded, with Joe's men on one side and the kid on the other. The kid would crown him with a can of something if he looked away. On the other hand, if he continued to face the kid, Joe's men could take him in the back.

"Why—nothing's going on," Jack answered the marshal. "The kid, here, was showing me his fancy pistol. I dropped it, accidentally, and it went off."

The muzzle of the pistol was only a couple yards from the kid's stomach. Jack turned half way to face the men in the door.

But he didn't alter the aim of the gun.

"Okay," Joe said sarcastically. "And all that stuff fell on the floor."

"That's it," Jack said. "That's just the way it was. The shot scared Gramp and he knocked this stuff over. We were just picking it up when—"

"Okay, okay," Joe said. "Then give the shooting iron back to the kid, and after this be more careful."

JACK had to do it or be called. He turned his back on the men at the door and tossed the pearl-handled weapon across to the kid. The kid caught the gun deftly, but before he could put finger to trigger Jack's broad back was the only thing the boy could see of the cowpuncher. Jack had figured the angles on this. The kid was rattled—and rotten in some way—but no brother of that girl out there at the shack could shoot a man in the back. Jack figured the kid could have socked him over the head a moment ago, but you don't fight with tin cans when you pack a sixgun. Jack had figured one more angle—namely, that he might be wrong about this.

So the short hairs at the back of his head felt stiff as pig bristles as he grinned at the men in the doorway.

Joe was stopped cold. He had expected a fight, but this tall, lean stranger had even backed up against the counter so that he could not even get to his pistol readily. This wasn't right. Joe would have to go back and find out what Nick Burton thought of this.

"Okay, okay." Joe was repeating himself. "But just watch your step, fella."

"Sure will," Jack said, "and thanks."

Joe back through the doorway. The kid started to shiver. Gramp was cursing to himself in a dull monotone.

Jack said quietly: "I'll help you pick up the rest of this stuff, Kid. Then we'll take it to your sister."

The kid seemed to have lost all his spirit. He had not lost it permanently, Jack knew, but for the present, at least he would do as he was told.

He stood there like a crazy man, holding onto his gun, staring at it, but unable to use it.

"Put that iron away," Jack said curtly. Jack was already gathering up the stuff from the floor, wiping off the cans that had been spattered with syrup and peaches. "Come on, give me a hand, Kid."

The kid holstered the .44 and went to work. He seemed hypnotized. He helped Jack haul the stuff outside and load it on the pack mule. The mule had ben traveling light lately and didn't like it. She kicked around some to show her feelings, then suddenly eased up and behaved. That mule knew just how far she could go before Jack would take a whack at her.

Then the kid snapped out of it, too. It was the blue dress that did it—the dress that, fortunately, had not been damaged during the battle. In a flash, that kid was right back where he had started.

"By God, Mister, you never did tell me what you was up to," he growled. "If you've been playing around with my sister. . . ."

"Look!" Jack was refolding the dress, putting it back in its box. "I don't even know your sister. I saw her, that's all, and talked to her for a couple minutes. She ordered me off with a shotgun. And if you make another crack like that, I'll give you a licking—d'you savvy that?"

The kid was still defiant. "Then why do you want to send this stuff out there—and that dress?" he demanded.

"Because she's starving," Jack said simply. "Because she don't have any clothes to wear except a shirt and pants that once must have been yours. If she was a cow that was starving, I'd do the same. Now shut up until you can do as good."

"I'm goin' out there," the kid threatened. "And if you—"

Jack ignored him. He checked the load. The town was as secret as sin and twice as quiet. Old Gramp's nerves would be jumping for another two days.

"When you get to that gal's shack," he whispered to Jack, "just leave the stuff and ride out—fast." Jack laughed. The old-timer went on: "I seen you at work in there, Mister, but you ain't come up against Nick Burton yet."

Jack said: "Nick won't do nothin'. He sent this kid down to tote this stuff, didn't he? If he'd do that, he wouldn't start in botherin' me at this late date."

The kid was still hanging back, sullen. It made no sense to him that a stranger would help out his sister as this hombre had done—and all for nothing. It was just plain crazy. The kid cut in on the conversation.

"Boston Rose made Nick do it."

The kid did not add something that Jack Boyle had already discovered for himself. Nick had wriggled out of Boston Rose's demand very neatly by choosing the kid for his errand boy. Nick had known what the kid would do. But Jack kept quiet about this, and when he glanced at Gramp, there was something in Gramp's eyes that told him Gramp knew the truth, too.

Gramp said: "You can't beat Nick, Mister."

Jack grinned. "I can try," he said.

JACK headed for the bridge, leading his mule. They had come a long piece today and that eight or ten miles to the girl's shack would be next to endless. But this thing was moving now; it was gathering momentum, and Jack could not wait. Jack reached the bridge and crossed it, noting the good solid resonance of sound timbers beneath his horse's feet. It was a good, wide bridge, a bridge that recently had been replanked in places. It was very strange to have a bridge like this over the rapids that had given their name to this rotting town. Yet there must be a reason for it, Jack thought, a very good reason.

And he let his mind play with strange fancies as he trotted slowly, wearily through the night.

Of course the natural trail north and south ran through here, down this river, across, then over the llano. But a bridge did not have to be that solid. Jack heard the tattoo of hoofs behind him and knew that would be the kid catching up with him. Nor was Jack disappointed when the youngster, forking a flashy silver-inlaid saddle cinched down on an excellent pinto gelding, drew up alongside him. The kid was trying to look tough. But out here in the warm night it only made him look like a sullen boy.

"You'll be damned sorry," the kid started whining again, "if you—"

Jack snapped at him. Jack had been talking soft all this time and knew the kid would expect more of the same. A change in pace might be advisable now.

"Let's lay off that line," Jack said sharply. "Let's pick up a new one. Let's discuss skunks."

"Now, listen," the kid said excitedly. "Nick Burton's my friend. You can't call Nick—"

"I'm not calling Nick anything," Jack cut him off. "I'm thinking of your sister—no food, no clothes. And I'm thinking of you—with a thousand dollar saddle and a five hundred dollar horse. That Stetson you're wearing cost more than all those groceries back there on the mule." He hesitated a moment. The kid had not quite caught his drift. He added: "So if we're going to talk about skunks, we don't have to go all the way back to the Rapids to smell a polecat."

"I should of killed you," the kid choked.

"Go ahead," Jack said. "Any time. But tell me first, kid, how-come you treat your sister that way?"

"She won't take no money from me," the kid muttered. "She won't take nothin' from nobody. If I'd rid out there tonight with all that junk she would of just throwed it in the river—or left it out front to rot." The kid was talking in a breathless manner, very fast, as if he had to get it all out at once. "She's just plain damn ornery. She could be queen bee around here, only she's too damn ornery. It's her own fault, Mister."

They rode on a while after that in a heavy silence. Queen Bee, Jack thought: Boston Rose. But there was more to it than that.

"You got me all wrong, Mister," the kid insisted. "If anybody'd put a hand on my sister, by God, I'd—"

"I heard about that," Jack said. "Well, kid, I'll take back that crack about smelling a skunk close up."

They had come into sight of the cabin and Jack felt relief. He was bone-weary and wanted to hit the hay for a spell. Somewhere, not too far away, he would find a safe hide-out for the night. Tomorrow would be another day.

The girl challenged them as they rode in together.

"Turn right around, boys," she called out. "I got a double-barreled shotgun here loaded with buck."

Jack slid down from the saddle and went back to the mule. Jack fumbled around with a gunnysack of provisions. He found what he wanted and turned toward the cabin.

The girl challenged again. "I mean it! You come one more step, and I'll—"

Jack just walked straight to her, tired, his shoulders sloping a bit.

"If I was you, Mister, I wouldn't." The kid's voice was high-pitched, excited. "She means it, Mister. If I was you—"

Jack kept on walking.

"Kid!" the girl cried. She had recognized the boy's voice. "Make him stop, Kid. . . ."

Jack's ears began to buzz. He had not thought of the kid. He had only thought of the girl, and the fact that she had no shells in her shotgun, and that the kid, of course, did not know that she was out of ammuniion.

"Stop him, Kid!" The girl's voice edged on a scream.

"Okay, Sis," the kid said, and the kid could not have missed the broad back of Jack Boyle at such close quarters.

Jack could hear the kid's hand slap against the butt of his fancy pistol.

The kid was not the kind of youngster to shoot a man in the back. But this was a special case. This man was menacing his sister—the sister in whom he took such a curious type of brotherly interest. It was okay to shoot a man in the back if he is menacing your sister.

That was the code—and Jack could hear the pistol clearing leather. He was not quite in the doorway to the shanty when the hammer clicked, cocked, snapped down. . . .

CHAPTER FOUR

Visitors with Guns

BACK there in the store Jack had not been too sure of things when he had returned the pearl-handled pistol to the boy. He was not sure how rattled the boy might be; or if he might not have underestimated the boy. So he had turned the cylinder of the pistol so that the first try at shooting would land the hammer on an empty cartridge.

But the kid had fetched a horse since then; he had gone up to the Crystal Palace for a drink—and probably instructions—since the meeting in the store. He had ridden ten miles in the dark and might easily have reloaded unobserved.

So Jack fully expected to die; and when the hammer of the pearl-handled Colt clicked emptily, he couldn't believe it.

Yet there was no explosion. The kid had forgotten to check his load. The kid cursed. And after that there was lead—live lead, deadly lead.

Now the kid was crazy with frustration and Jack, anticipating him, dove into the entrance of the shanty. He grabbed the girl, throwing her back from the doorway and pulling her down. As he did, a chunk of lead snapped into the dirt floor where she had been standing.

Jack got up. For a minute he thought he had knocked the girl cold, but she rose almost as soon as he did. He saw faint electric sparks from her dark hair as she brushed it back with an impatient hand. Then he heard a creak of leather as the kid put weight into one stirrup; then came a rattle of spurs. It's okay to ring spurs and rattle chains when you're prancing up and down a boardwalk. But out on the range, it's something else again; you're likely to snag yourself into a mean fall. Once the kid was tamed, Jack thought, he'd sure take a deal of learning.

Here he was making enough noise for a troop of cavalry, sneaking up on a black-out cabin and making himself a perfect target for a man who had plenty of reason besides self-defense for burning him down.

Jack laughed. The spur chains stopped jingling. He could sense the kid out there, tense, ready to strike.

"Here, Miss," Jack said softly. "I brought you a box of shells for that double-barreled gun. Now call off your brother."

He rattled the box so the girl could find it by sound. For a second her fingers touched his. They were cold from fright and excitement. Then the weight of the box was transferred. He heard her slipping the cover.

"Put up your iron," she called to the kid then, "and come in here with your hands over your head."

Deftly she loaded her shotgun. The kid's pistol dropped into its holster with a soft *chunk*. The spur chains rattled again. . . .

THE girl lighted a stub of candle. She sat with her back against a moldy log wall. Looking first at Jack, then at her brother, she seemed absolutely adamant.

"I'm takin' nothing from Nick Burton," she

said. Even in stubbornness her voice had that song to it, soft and sweet like a slow brook in the springtime. "Just tote all that junk back and throw it in Nick's gutter."

Jack said: "You taken those shotgun shells."

The girl's glance wavered. That had been an unfair thing to say, in a way. She had to have those shells. With a bare foot she shoved the box across the dirt floor toward Jack. It passed over the spot where her brother's shot had dug a hole in the dirt floor.

"You still got two shells in the gun," Jack reminded her.

Angrily the girl broke the breech, jacking out the two shells, which rolled across the floor. She bit at her lower lip, anger still riding her.

"She's just pig-headed," the kid said, disgustedly. "She could have anything she wants, if she'd—"

"A dime of that skunk's money or an ounce of his flour would stink up this house forever," she said vehemently.

The kid shrugged. This attitude of hers was one he could never savvy. The girl had thrown her head forward so the long, glossy hair hid her face. Her shoulders trembled. She was very close to breaking. And it might be a good thing, Jack thought. That pride of hers was leading her into a blind path, a foolish path. It was locking her up like a frozen hammer on a rusty gun. But something had happened to the kid. He was acting very strange. He stared at Jack, as if wanting to speak, and Jack did nothing to help him out.

"Maybe I'm crazy," he blurted at last with sudden explosiveness.

The girl glanced up at him and Jack saw that her eyes were as blue as the boy's. White teeth still held her lower lip, which had become flaming red. Her anger changed abruptly into incredulity.

"I never thought you'd admit it," she said.

"I don't mean that," the kid said. "I mean this hombre goes and buys you forty-dollars worth of stuff—all for nothing. I come out here tonight to see what he's making up for with all this stuff. And it ain't nothing."

"Maybe *I'm* crazy," Jack said. "But I'd do the same for a sheepherder. Well. . . ." He stood up. His shadow thrown on the wall was gigantic. "I'm leaving that stuff here and it can rot for all I give a damn. Even the dress. Good-night!"

Jack heard the girl mutter: "Dress!" but by then he was out of the house, carefully stepping away from the lighted doorway. He went to his mule. He untied the two big sacks of stuff and dropped them on the ground. The mule took a deep breath, arced her back, then moved around a little to loosen up. It brayed suddenly. Then the horse whinnied and inched over toward Jack. A shadow came rushing from the shanty.

The girl reached Jack and tugged at his arm.

"You're really on the level, Mister?" she cried.

"Look!" He faced her. He took her by both her shoulders and immediately wished he had not touched her. Those shoulders fitted into his big hands as if they had been made for that purpose; and her wide eyes picked up starlight. "I didn't figure on coming back out here, Miss. I tried to get a delivery boy to bring that stuff to you. Nick Burton sent down your kid brother. As swap for a favor he tried to plug me twice tonight, and I don't figure on giving him excuse for a third attempt. Good-night."

He took his hands from her shoulders but she continued to stare up at him. He wheeled abruptly away from her and climbed aboard his horse.

"Mister—wait!"

The girl ran after him. He ignored her. When she grabbed at his leg as if to hold him back he gently disengaged her grip, and she dropped her hand. She stood there in the night, staring after him as he rode slowly away. . . .

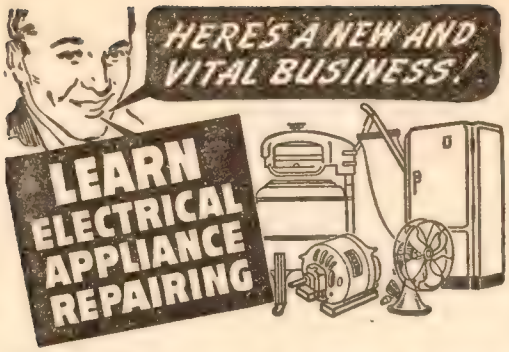
When passing down this way Jack had observed a likely little brook coming from a ravine off to the left where he now thought he would find graze for his animals and a safe hide-out for himself. It was a bit below the girl's cabin, on the way to Wolf Rapids and not too hard to find in the darkness since he had to ford it. So, when the horse's hoofs sloshed in water, Jack turned left to ride upstream. He rode for nearly a mile through timber and occasional open meadows before coming to a spot that he thought would do. Here he cached his stuff, hanging it from the limb of a pine. He staked out his horse and mule to graze. They immediately rolled vigorously, rubbing their backs and sides in the grass. Jack envied them.

He hauled in his belt a notch, picked up his bedroll, and went hunting for a suitable spot to bivouack for the night. He would eat later.

JACK BOYLE was wide awake the moment dawn brightened the pines above him; instantly awake, aware of what he was doing here and why. It was that girl with the haunting beauty, and the kid on the road to hell—a couple whose names he had never learned, though their problem was still a vague worry in his mind. One did not trust him. The other had tried to kill him.

So the hell with them.

He washed very carefully at the stream. He even shaved with an old straight razor. This time his face was smooth, soft. He



Offers Big Money—Independence

If you are mechanically inclined—can hold and use tools it will pay you to learn electrical appliance repairing. Operate from your garage, basement, etc. Work as many hours as you wish—the appliance repairman is his own boss. On many types of repairs it is usual for a repairman to charge on the basis of $5.00 to $6.00 an hour.

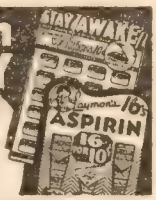
No Previous Experience Needed

Profusely illustrated our new course shows you in simple, easy to understand language plus drawings and photographs, how to make each repair on refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, motors, fans, irons, etc., etc. Explains and gives you a working knowledge of electricity, welding, nickel plating, etc. Shows you how to build the power tools you need and how to solicit and keep business coming to you. Not a theory course but an honest to goodness practical course written by and used by repairmen the country over. Price of course is so low that the savings on your own household appliances will pay for it. Act now! Send today for FREE literature. **Christy Supply Co., 2835 N. Central Ave., Dept. D-1018, Chicago 34, Illinois.**

Learn BAKING At Home

Baking is one of America's high industries in wages. Nearly depression-proof. Thorough basic home course lays sound foundation. If you have aptitude, write for FREE BOOKLET, "Opportunities in Commercial Baking." **National Baking School, 1315 Mich. Ave., Dept. 1414, Chicago 5**

Store Route Plan PAYS BIG MONEY



SELL COUNTER CARD PRODUCTS

Build a good-paying business of your own. Call on dealers of all kinds; show nationally-advertised Aspirin, Vitamins, Cosmetics and 200 other necessities. Big 5c and 10c retail packages, high quality. Attractive counter displays sell goods fast. Free book gives amazing facts. Write! **World's Products Co., Dpt. 69-Y, Spencer, Ind.**

DRAW for MONEY!

Be An ARTIST!

Trained Artists are Capable of Earning $30, $50, $75 a Week

It's pleasant and interesting to study Art the W.S.A. way. **COMMERCIAL ART, DESIGNING, CARTOONING** all in ONE complete home study course. No previous Art experience necessary—hundreds have profited by our practical methods since 1914. TWO ART OUTFITS furnished. Full information in FREE BOOK. "Art for Pleasure and Profit." Write today. State age.

FREE BOOK gives details

WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF ART,
Studio 244C, 1115 15th St., N. W.
Washington 5, D. C.

Name.....AGE.....

Address.....

City..... Zone ( ) State.....

chewed on an alder twig to clean his teeth and put on a fresh shirt and pair of Oregon pants that he had been saving in his saddlebags.

Then he was ready to saddle up. He wondered what old Gramp would think when he told him how he had delivered the goods to the girl. And he still had an appointment with Nick Burton—an appointment that Nick, as yet, knew nothing about.

Where the brook crossed the trail the horse turned right and broke into a lope. The mule hung right onto the horse's tail, her pack being light. But when they came into sight of the girl's house, Jack reined in. There was a thin spiral of smoke coming from the mud chimney; a smell of bacon and coffee and cornbread hung sweetly in the air. A girl was singing, but Jack had never heard of the *Loreli*. He had already come two miles out of his way. There was no point in going on without at least saying hello and good-by to the girl. Queer, he thought, how he had come up here, not intending to see her again.

And yet here he was, stepping down from his horse, looking for the kid's mount and not finding it. His shadow darkened the little shanty as he stepped into the doorway.

"Morning," he said.

She was sitting on a chunk of wood beside her small, dilapidated fire-place. Coffee sent up fragrant steam. Hoe-cakes were cooking. She was broiling bacon on a hot rock she had propped up in front of the flames. When she glanced at him, her head was cocked sidewise so that her dark hair flowed down over her face. He found it suddenly hard to breathe. She was wearing that blue dress, and it fitted her as if it had been made for her.

"Morning," she said.

He had to tear his eyes away. Two places were set at the split log table. The dishes were of wood, but the silver was sterling.

"Didn't notice the kid's horse," Jack said.

"He went to town," the girl said. "He's not coming back—ever."

"Now, look—" Jack said. He meant about those two places set at the table. But he could only repeat himself. "Now, look—"

"Breakfast is ready," she said.

She divided the bacon between the two wooden plates. She poured coffee into thick, chipped mugs. Then she brought out a can of milk with two holes punched in it, and a jar of butter that was dewed from immersion in the spring. Her wonderfully golden-brown hoe-cake was streaming fragrantly. God, it was enough to drive a man into delirium!

The girl's forehead creased. "Been so long since you set down to a table you don't know how?" she asked.

"My gosh," Jack said. "No . . . hell no."

He moved to pull out the girl's bench, but she was already on it. Fumbling, he sat on his own. The girl was looking at her plate; was praying.

"Thank God," she murmured, "and the provider."

Then she looked up at Jack, her blue eyes glowing, her cheeks pink under the golden tan. She was smiling, rich lips just parted over her even white teeth. "Ma used to use that grace," she said simply. "This is Ma's silver. I got some more. I kept it buried for I don't know how long."

Jack touched a piece in awe, and the initial, much worn, was "B." Jack could hardly eat. "B"—what did that stand for? He tried to ask her, but his throat was knotted. Then he took a big drink of coffee and concentrated for a while on the food. After he had gotten the first mouthful down the second went much easier. When he was through his stomach felt firm and solid, and a warm contentment flooded him.

He got up, went to the doorway, and stretched. This was a good country—much too rich a country for so decadent a town and such a run-down shanty as this. Then he saw something he had not noticed before—a blighted spot yonder. He saw the base of a windmill, too, and he knew that no one would have had a windmill so near Paint Creek unless there had once been a house here also. There must have once been a fine house here, which had been burned down, years earlier.

His mule was staring south, her ears flat.

Jack glanced back into the cabin where the girl was clearing the table.

"Riders," he called to her, "from town."

Terror swept her. "You've got to go, Jack. You've got to get out of here!" she cried.

He smiled. He was all at peace now. He knew just exactly what he had to do. This girl had used his name, his first name, and she had set a place at the table for him with her mother's silver.

"I'm staying," he said.

He went to the door, and after a while she came over to him. She had not tried to argue with him when he said he would stay, and he liked that.

"You still think I'm one of Nick Burton's boys?" he said.

"No," she said simply.

He left the doorway. The hoofbeats had become quite distinct now. Swiftly he unsaddled his horse and turned it loose. He took the pack from the mule, which immediately high-tailed for the timber. After a second, the horse followed. Jack came back to the shanty dragging his rig with him and had just gotten

My Friends wouldn't believe I'd ever had GRAY HAIR!

Imagine—in just a few weeks every trace of gray was gone, and the change was so gradual and so perfect my friends forgot I ever had a gray hair. Wonderful, how you can now

Just Comb the Gray Away!

It's so easy, so simple! Just comb your hair once a day for a few days with a few drops of Kolor-Bak sprinkled on your comb. No muss; no fuss; no mixing. Kolor-Bak is a solution for artificially coloring gray hair that imparts color and charm and abolishes gray hair worries quickly.

Men, too, Praise the New KOLOR-BAK

They find it helps them look years younger; makes them feel more secure about business and social success. Get new Kolor-Bak at your drug or department store on maker's guarantee of satisfaction or money back.

MILITARY Waterproof WATCH

THIS WATCH is the ultimate in fine SWISS WATCHES.

Seventeen (17) Ruby Jewels, set in the finest Precision Movement. A Steel Vault really. Waterproof Case, Stainless Steel Back, Unbreakable Crystal, Radium Dial & Hands, Sweep Second Hand, Non-Magnetic. The movement is "INCABLOC SHOCK-PROOF". Sensational 1 year guarantee, if for any reason you break this watch it will be repaired FREE of any charge, if returned to us. Comparatively few People will be lucky enough to own this watch as Swiss Imports are limited. Order Now! Send Money order for $49.50 and watch will fly to you by return air mail. Immediate refund if dissatisfied. C.O.D. orders filled.

FREE REPAIRS WITH WRITTEN GUARANTEE

49.50 P.P.D. TAX INCL.

BRADLEY JEWELERS, *(Dept. 7) P.O. Box 49, Fordham Sta., New York City 58, N. Y.*

Want a 1946 Government Job?

Start $1,506 to $2,650 year

MEN — WOMEN. Thousands postwar positions. Prepare NOW for next Examinations. Write immediately for free 32-page book, with list of positions and particulars telling how to qualify. Veterans get preference.

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. M-56
Rochester 4, N. Y.

LEARN WATCH & CLOCK REPAIRING At Home

STEADY WORK • SECURITY • HIGH PAY

Prepare yourself now for this fascinating high-grade occupation. You can earn while you learn. This UP-TO-DATE COURSE IN HOROLOGY shows you how to get the practical working experience you need for big-time success. THOROUGH SELF-INSTRUCTION TRAINING in American and Swiss watches, clocks, etc. Interesting **LEARN-BY-DOING** teaching method makes lessons easy. No previous experience necessary. Watchmaking is BASIC TRAINING for many scientific and mechanical precision jobs. Amazing low price. Satisfaction or money-back guarantee. Get into this fast-growing field NOW . . . big opportunities. Mail coupon for free information.

LOCKSMITHING & Key Making

Practical modern course for self-instruction. How to pick locks, de-code, make masterkeys, repair, install, service, etc., etc. For carpenter, fix-it shop, service station operator, hardware dealer, gunsmith, mechanic, home-owner, 58 easy illustrated lessons. Mail coupon for free details.

Practical ELECTRICITY

Quick course for men who demand how-to-do-it practical facts. Covers house-wiring, generators, storage batteries, telephones, lighting equipment, telegraphy, welding, etc. 55 lessons at surprisingly low price. Satisfaction guaranteed. Mail coupon below for complete interesting details.

SHORT-CUT Mathematics

How to be a "master mind!" This 2-in-1 self-study course teaches how to juggle figures, do baffling tricks with numbers. Also teaches practical mechanics . . . for every technically minded man who wants to get ahead. Used by stage magicians, expert accountants, etc. Only $1. See coupon.

FREE! 100-PAGE BOOK! Mail this Now

NELSON CO., Dept. 3D05, 321 S. Wabash Ave., Chicago 5, Ill.

Please send me — free and without obligation—big illustrated Success-Catalog containing complete information about subject (subjects) checked below. (No salesman will call).

☐ Watch & Clock Repairing ☐ Practical Electricity
☐ Locksmithing & Key making ☐ Short-Cut Mathematics

*Name*_____

*Address*_____

STAMMER?

This new 128-page book "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 45 years.
Benj. N. Bogue, Dept. 2977, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

IF YOU ARE AMBITIOUS you can make good money with a Rawleigh Route. We help you get started. No experience needed to start. Steady work. Write Rawleigh Co., Box D-2-PBL, Freeport, Ill.

LAW STUDY AT HOME for PERSONAL SUCCESS and LARGER EARNINGS. 37 years expert instruction—over 108,000 students enrolled. LL.B. Degree awarded. All texts furnished. Easy payments. Send for FREE BOOK—"Law and Executive Guidance"—NOW!
AMERICAN EXTENSION SCHOOL OF LAW
Dept. 64-B, 646 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago 11, Ill.

BE A SHOW CARD WRITER

Be independent. Big money. Learn showcard writing. Fascinating. No special skill needed. Lifetime business of your own. Write for information.
SHERWOOD PUBLISHING CO.
P. O. BOX 8 A IRVINGTON, N. J.

Relieve Misery of ITCH

Relieve itching caused by eczema, athlete's foot, pimples—other itching troubles. Use cooling, medicated **D.D.D. Prescription.** Greaseless, stainless. Quiets itching fast. 35c trial bottle proves it—or money back. Ask your druggist for **D.D.D. Prescription.**

inside when the riders broke into view across the clearing.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gunsmoke Show-down

THERE were only two of them, one forking a beautiful pinto pony, the other riding a big black. They were two people whom neither the girl nor Jack expected at all. They were the kid, bleary-eyed from lack of sleep—and Boston Rose. Boston Rose wore a long-skirted, fawn-colored riding habit with Stetson to match. There was a holstered six-shooter slung from her saddle. Darkened crescents showed under her china-blue eyes, but she laughed as she drew in before the shanty.

"You two don't need to pull your shootin' irons on us," she cried. "We're eloping."

The kid was fidgity. He communicated some of this tenseness to his horse, which stomped nervously. If they were eloping they were damned fools to do it in this manner with a horse that had been ridden too much in the last twenty-four hours, and a big black carrying a side-saddle. They could not elope very far or very fast in this fashion.

The girl was speechless. But Jack said shortly: "Okay, what's the josh?"

"It's not just the way Boston Rose says it," the kid declared.

Jack remembered how, last night, Boston Rose had seemed rather common, then, abruptly, rather sweet and pretty. This morning something of the same change was apparent in her.

"We're running out on Nick," Boston Rose explained. "You two better come along."

"No!" the girl said, from behind Jack.

Boston Rose frowned. "This is not what you think," she said. "The kid and me—we were both played for suckers by Burton. Well, damn it, the kid never had a mother that he knew, and by God, I'm going to provide him with one!"

The kid seemed absolutely serious. "This is on the level," he said. "I learnt my lesson last night, Mister Boyle. Honest to God!"

"You leave God out of it," Boston Rose said. "You and me have got to act respectable, kid, so quit cussing."

The kid seemed ashamed of himself. He seemed jittery as a jumping bean on a hot rock.

"Okay, Rose," he said. "Look, sis, get moving. You can ride that old mule. Soon as Nick finds out we run out on him he'll be after us with every damn gunnie in the Rapids. We got nothing here—but we'll sure have plenty where we're going."

The girl behind Jack shook her head. "No," she said. "Pa came to this place before Nick was born. Pa picked up Nick when Nick was just a kid saddle tramp. Nick stole everything Pa had—everything everybody had. Nick made you into a bum, kid, but he's not chasin' me out—ever."

It was a good speech. It held those two on their horses, and it had its effect on Jack.

Jack asked, very slowly and softly: "What makes you think Nick gives a damn if you two run out on him?"

Their expressions immediately became secretive and knowing. But Jack still thought he was right. The other night in the Crystal Palace Nick Burton had acted mighty annoyed with Boston Rose's interference. He might be glad to be rid of her; and since the kid had failed him, too, he might be pleased if the kid also high-tailed.

Jack put the thought into words: "I wouldn't be surprised if Nick wouldn't be glad to have you two off his books."

Boston Rose began to laugh. She laughed very easily, her red-painted lips gleaming.

"Don't worry," she said, "he'll be after us. We tapped his till. We got nearly a hundred-thousand dollars in those saddlebags."

The kid looked smug. "We're headin' west," he said. "San Francisco, maybe, or Alaska. We're going to live right." He swelled up with a deep breath. "Coming, Sis?"

"No," the girl said slowly. "Never."

THE taste of dust was in the air after Boston Rose and the kid left on the road north. It lingered for a long time after their passing—a bitter, strange taste, a taste that had much of memory in it. Jack Boyle was thinking of when he was a kid—thinking of his father, another Nick had ruined in the course of his far-flung operations. There had been half a dozen brothers and sisters in the Boyle household, but they had grown up and scattered. Still, his father and mother had seen to it that they had grown up right, while this kid had never known either his mother or father.

Even so, the story of Boston Rose's did not sound quite right.

"What kind of a mother you reckon she'll make him?" Jack asked the girl.

Jack was sitting on one of the wooden benches, smoking a brown-paper cigarette to get the taste of the dust out of his mouth. The girl was rinsing the wooden plates and very carefully washing and drying the precious silver that had been her mother's. Jack thought she was crying, though he could not be sure because her back was to him and her shoulders were steady except when they moved under her chores.

I'll PROVE I can make
you, too,
TOUGH as a
MARINE
.....and add
Powerful POUNDS
and Vital INCHES of
DYNAMIC MUSCLE
to your ARMS, LEGS,
BACK, CHEST,
and SHOULDERS
Says
George F. Jowett
WORLD'S GREATEST
BODY BUILDER
..OR IT WON'T COST YOU A CENT!
Let me prove to YOU that you can put inches of dynamic muscles on your arms! Add inches to your chest! Broaden your shoulders and power-pack the rest of your body. I can do for you what I've done for thousands the world over, including many officers and men now in the U. S. and British Armed Forces!

GIVE ME 10 MINUTES A DAY!

I'll Show You My Secrets Of Body Building

I'll help you learn the "Progressive Power Method" through which I rebuilt myself from a physical wreck to the holder of more strength records than any other living athlete or teacher! No matter how skinny or flabby you are, you can learn my methods right in your own home. Through my proved secrets I show you how to develop your power, inside and out, until YOU are fully satisfied that you are the man you want to be. "The Jowett System," says R. F. Kelly, Physical Director of the YMCA, Atlantic City, "is the greatest in the world!"

If you want a physique that will inspire respect from men, and admiration from women . . . ACT LIKE A HE-MAN! Decide at once! The famous book, "Nerves of Steel—Muscles Like Iron" will be included FREE! Priceless for the strength fan! Full of photos of marvelous power-bodied men who will show you what Jowett has done for them and how he can do the same for you. Reach out . . . Grasp this Special Offer today!

PROVE TO YOURSELF IN ONE NIGHT!

Send only 25c for test Course, "Molding a Mighty Arm." Read it the evening it arrives—learn from experience the thrill you can give your muscles!

SEND FOR THESE FIVE FAMOUS COURSES IN BOOK FORM

ONLY 25c EACH or ALL 5 for $1.00

Jowett Institute of Physical Culture
230 Fifth Avenue
Dept. 946
New York 1, N. Y.

This Book Free!

LOOK WITH PHOTOS OF FAMOUS STRONG MEN
MAIL COUPON NOW **FREE**

Jowett Institute of Physical Culture
230 Fifth Avenue, Dept. 946, New York 1, N. Y.

George F. Jowett: Your proposition looks good to me. Send by return mail, prepaid, the courses checked below, for which I enclose ( ). Include FREE book of PHOTOS.

George F. Jowett Champion of Champions

☐ All 5 courses for.... $1 ☐ Molding Mighty Legs 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Arm 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Grip 25c
☐ Molding a Mighty Back 25c ☐ Molding a Mighty Chest 25c
☐ Send all 5 C.O.D. ($1 plus postage.) No orders less than $1 sent C.O.D.

NAME..... Age.....
(Please print plainly. Include Zone Number.)

ADDRESS .....

Easy Way to Ease Itch of
ECZEMA
Due to External Causes

Here are 3 simple steps to take. 1. Don't scratch. 2. Apply Sayman Salve directly on affected areas. 3. Bandage lightly. That's all! See if this grand medicated ointment doesn't bring you the comforting relief thousands of others say it has brought them. Wonderful also for rough, red, chapped or cracked skin, minor burns, other skin irritations. Big 4-oz. Economy Size only 60c; regular 1½-oz. size 25c. All druggists.

SAYMAN SALVE

Train Your Own HORSES!

Colts - Stock Horses - Circus Horses
Gait Show Horses - Write for FREE BOOK
ANIMAL LOVERS' ASSOCIATION
Box G-111, Tarzana, Calif.

High School Course at Home
Many Finish in 2 Years

Go as rapidly as your time and abilities permit. Course equivalent to resident school work—prepares for college entrance exams. Standard H.S. texts supplied. Diploma. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed. Single subjects if desired. High school education is very important for advancement in business and industry and socially. Don't be handicapped all your life. Be a High School graduate. Start your training now. Free Bulletin on request. No obligation.
American School, Dpt. H-449, Drexel at 58th, Chicago 37

MECHANICS • HOME STUDY

Step up your own skill with the facts and figures of your trade. Audels Mechanics Guides contain Practical Inside Trade Information in a handy form. Fully illustrated and Easy to Understand. Highly Endorsed. Check the book you want for 7 days' Free Examination. Send No Money. Nothing to pay postman. ☐ Refrigeration $4 • ☐ Radio $4 ☐ Pumps & Hydraulics $4 • ☐ Machinist $4 • ☐ Diesel $2 ☐ Plumbers $6 • ☐ Shipfitter $1 • ☐ Welders $1 • ☐ Auto $4 ☐ Mathematics $2 • ☐ Electricity $4 • ☐ Carpenters $6 ☐ Marine $4 • ☐ Blueprint $2 • ☐ Sheet Metal $1.
If satisfied you pay only $1 a month until price is paid.
AUDEL, Publishers, 49 W. 23 St., New York 10, N. Y.

INVENTORS

Secure patent protection now. Avoid delays. Get new FREE book, "Protect, Finance, and Sell Your Invention" and FREE "Invention Record" form. Experienced, conscientious counsel. Reasonable fees—easy payment plan. Write today.
McMORROW & BERMAN *Registered Patent Attorneys*
1303 Atlantic Building, Washington 4, D. C.

NEW CHEAP OIL BURNER
FOR COOKING & HEATING STOVES-FURNACES
HEAT YOUR HOME, COOK YOUR MEALS WITH CHEAP FURNACE OIL

NO MORE SHOVELING COAL OR ASHES. New Fuelizer starter Vaporizing System turns Cheap 130 Flash Furnace Oil into Oil Gas heat without clogging up. LIFE-TIME GUARANTEE against defects. $1.00-BONUS OFFER FOR TESTING. We will let you try it in your own stove or furnace for one month. Get yours for introducing. Big profits. Be first. Send in your name today.
NORTHWEST MFG. CO., 586-D 8th Ave., Mitchell, So. Dak.

TOOTHACHE?
DUE TO CAVITY

Get QUICK relief with Dent's Tooth Gum or Dent's Tooth Drops! "Cavity Toothache" frequently strikes at night. Be prepared. Buy either package from your druggist today. Keep it handy for children and adults. Follow easy directions.
DENT'S TOOTH GUM TOOTH DROPS 25¢

"A hundred thousand dollars worth," she said dryly.

Jack had to laugh at that, and his laugh was good. But the girl was frankly crying now. She hugged the silver to her breast and Jack was sorry because he had laughed, because he felt that he had made her cry.

"The kid and me—" she said shakenly. "Him and me—after Pa died—" she faltered, her voice cracking. "He was ornery enough, God knows, and I was too damn mule-headed. I should have gone away, taken him with me."

"Wait a minute," Jack said.

The girl stopped crying. Distantly, Jack could hear a steady drumming of hoofs. Quickly he strode to the doorway.

"Nick Burton," Jack murmured.

Of course it would be Nick—and Boston Rose had planned against such a contingency. She had gotten herself a bodyguard. She had sold the kid a phoney bill of goods. She knew he would fight and die for her, if she gave him the chance. But Jack did not mention this to the girl. She probably had known it was like that all along. . . .

Nick's men hit the clearing in a wide fan-like formation, one group coming through timber, another up the edge of the river. Jack's horse and mule stampeded the moment the riders appeared, drawing off some of the men, who thought someone was escaping. But the other three advanced on the shanty, keeping well away from the rickety little building, out of shotgun and pistol range.

Jack turned over one of the heavy benches in the doorway and lay flat on his stomach behind it. His carbine was fully loaded. His six-shooter was handy, too, and this time he loosened it in the leather and tied down the holster tip as well. The girl flattened herself beside him. She had her shotgun loaded with buck. She did not seem to be frightened.

"They don't know I'm here," Jack whispered. "If they did know, they'd keep out of carbine range."

He kept his sights on the silver badge pinned to Joe Tweedy's suspenders. Nick Burton, forking on a big steeldust, had fallen slightly behind Joe. He let Joe do the talking.

"Trot 'em out!" Joe called out curtly.

"They want the kid," the girl said to Jack.

Joe moved in a little closer and Nick Burton came up to halt beside him. Nick Burton was the kind of man who did not believe in shouting.

"Come on out, Rose," he called softly. "It's the kid we want."

Jack moved his sights over so that they covered Nick Burton. This was his chance—the chance he had traveled miles for.

"The kid's only fifteen," the girl started to

whisper again, as if arguing with Jack's thoughts.

"I don't have all day," Nick said conversationally. "We'll rip that place to pieces if you don't send out the kid."

The girl said: "It's not your war, Jack."

"You don't know the whole story," Jack said.

By her tone he knew that she was going to fight to keep those men from catching up with her no-good, deluded brother. He also knew that there was nothing he could do to keep from fighting. Now he had Nick's chest across his sights, and it made a fine target, and he slowly pressed on the trigger. But Nick's nervous horse tossed its head at that moment and took the first shot right in the middle of the head. The horse dropped dead right there in his tracks without even kicking. Nick landed on both feet, still holding the horse's reins, staring at the animal in dazed unbelief.

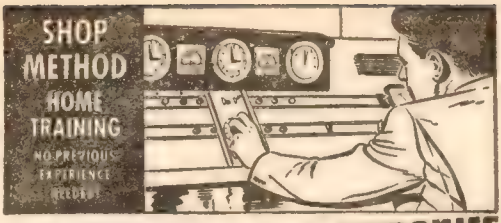
Joe Tweedy and the other gunman gawped at Nick, who had assured them that there was no rifle in the shanty. One of the men who had gone into the woods after Jack's horse and mule reappeared briefly at the edge of timber, shouting something that Jack could not hear. The girl's shotgun had begun to roar.

JOE TWEEDY was the first to break. A natural coward, he wheeled his horse to make his escape. But Jack's rifle caught him. Tweedy groaned and slid from the saddle. He hit on his back as the horse ran out from under him and did not move after that.

Now a riderless horse was galloping along the edge of timber, heading toward town; Jack moved his sights over to the second gunnie. This hombre was a man with genuine nerve. When the shooting had started he had slipped from the saddle to kneel in the grass and work his carbine. One of his bullets hit Jack's hat where the band was snug against his temple. It cut a groove in the felt as it ricochetted off. Jack yelled to clear his brain. His sights were weaving before his eyes. Now he dropped the carbine and drew his pistol. Gunsmoke made the girl sneeze violently.

Jack could not find Nick Burton out there. Nick was not holed up behind his dead horse, nor had he had had an opportunity to escape. Jack lifted his head higher over the bench to look for Nick. Then he poked his head out through the door and a bullet whistled by so close that Jack could feel its breeze. It slapped into the shanty wall, kicking up a handful of splinters. By then Jack was back inside.

He guessed where Nick must be, to the left of the doorway, and took the shotgun from the sneezing girl. He tied a bit of rawhide to the triggers, dropped the gun out the door and



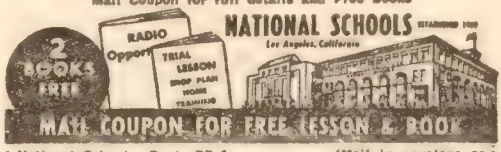
Get into RADIO ELECTRONICS TELEVISION now!

SHOP METHOD HOME TRAINING

Command good jobs as Radio Technician in Uncle Sam's forces or in civilian industries. National's actual shop practice methods qualify you. Investigate!

Your opportunity is here. Radio technicians needed everywhere—afield in action and at home in industry. Get into Radionics and Television. National Schools offers tested home training method—an actual extension of training you would receive if attending school in person.

FREE LESSON AND OPPORTUNITY BOOK
Mail Coupon for full details and Free Books



MAIL COUPON FOR FREE LESSON & BOOK

National Schools, Dept. PP-4
4000 So. Figueroa, Los Angeles 37, Calif.
(Mail in envelope or paste on penny postal)

Mail me FREE without obligation, one Lesson and Opportunity Book, with full details about how I CAN become a RADIO Technician.

NAME ..... AGE.....
ADDRESS .....
CITY ..... STATE.....
INCLUDE YOUR ZONE NUMBER

Now for EVERY WORK SHOP!
NEW Invention Electroplates by BRUSH

Easy to Plate CHROMIUM GOLD, SILVER, NICKEL, COPPER
. . . For Pleasure and Profit!

If you have a workshop—at home or in business—you need this new Warner Electroplater. At the stroke of an electrified brush, you can electroplate models and projects—you can replate worn articles, faucets, tools, fixtures, silverware, etc. with a durable, sparkling coat of metal . . . Gold, Silver, Chromium, Nickel, Copper or Cadmium. Method is easy, simple, quick. Everything furnished—equipment complete, ready for use. *By doing a bit of work for others, your machine can pay for itself within a week.* So make your shop complete by getting a Warner Electroplater right away. Send today for FREE SAMPLE and illustrated literature. ACT AT ONCE! *Mail Coupon.*
WARNER ELECTRIC CO., DEPT. H-1
663 N. Wells St., Chicago 10, Illinois

FREE Details & Sample!

WARNER ELECTRIC CO., 663 N. Wells St., Chicago 10, Dept. H-1
Gentlemen: Send Free Sample and Details to:
Name
Address
City State

INTRODUCING-New Victory Model
HANDIWELD ELECTRIC
ARC WELDER
FULLY GUARANTEED
RETAILS ONLY $1.95

PLUGS into LIGHT SOCKET

VICTORY Model Handiweld Arc Welder operates from 110 volts, A.C. or D.C. current same as other arc welders higher priced; generates tremendous heat to weld all metals. Not a toy welder that uses carbons, but actually uses standard coated rods —sizes 1/16" and 3/32". Generous quantity of 1/16" and 3/32" rods supplied with the welder. Guaranteed not to burn out. Repairs fenders, auto bodies, radiators, machinery parts, etc. Take Victory Model Handiweld anywhere to job, operate right from light socket. You'll find a thousand uses for this welder around your home, garage, workshop. Also in garages, factories, repair shops, tin shops; mechanics, inventors, plumbers, farmers, etc. Order a "VICTORY MODEL" HANDIWELD today!

SEND NO MONEY We'll rush one to you with rods, helmet, operating instructions, and all necessary parts with the exception of a large jar and small piece of extension cord; these most everyone has. Pay postman only $1.95 plus few cents p'st'ge. If not delighted return Victory Model Handiweld in 5 days from receipt and money paid for it will be refunded promptly. Rush your order now.

KUMFY PRODUCTS, Dept. G-229, Cincinnati 25, Ohio

INVENTORS

Learn now — without obligation — how to protect and sell your invention. Secure "Patent Guide" Free. Write

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN & HARVEY JACOBSON
Registered Patent Attorneys
626-C Adams Building Washington, D. C.

Learn Profitable Profession in 90 days at Home

MEN AND WOMEN, 18 TO 50—Many Swedish Massage graduates make $50, $75 or even more per week. Larger full time incomes from doctors, hospitals, sanatoriums, clubs or private practice. Others make good money in spare time. You can win independence and prepare for future security by training at home and qualifying for Diploma. Anatomy Charts and 32-page Illustrated Book FREE—NOW!
The College of Swedish Massage
Dpt. 695D, 100 E. Ohio St., Chicago 11

BIG MONEY NOW IN
LIQUID MARBLE

THREE wonderful new opportunities for your own big money-making business — regardless of your age, sex, or previous experience!

1. LIQUID MARBLE. Make beautiful artificial Marble Slabs. Pour from liquid state. Glazed or unglazed. This marble may be mottled, veined, multi-colored or left in original snow-white state. The color is actually a part of the marble! Does not fade or wear away. Liquid Marble is unsurpassed on kitchen or bathroom walls. Easy to make and install.

2. PLASTIC FLOORING. May be made in any color or combination of colors. Gives a lifetime of wear. Dustproof, Soundproof, Verminproof. Resilient to the tread. Lay out solid from wall to wall or in pattern design of various shaped blocks.

3. FLEXIBLE MOLDS. For plaster casting. Make your own moulds for few cents each. $1.00 in raw materials will make up to $25.00 worth of finished goods. We furnish names of buyers. Write now for FREE information about our BIG THREE money-making opportunities! Get in on busy season just starting. Send penny postcard or letter. No obligation.

COMPO-TEX, Box 786-PO ST. LOUIS 1, MO.

yanked. Both barrels let go, kicking the gun back through the grass and sending a shower of buckshot and dirt at Nick Burton. Nick cursed. Jack followed up his momentary advantage by stepping out of the doorway with his pistol ready. Nick was screaming, shouting for Joe Tweedy.

Jack moved in on him. Nick was sitting down, fumbling blindly for the pistol that he had lost when the shotgun went off so close to him. Jack tried to kick the gun, but Nick snatched it up. Jack shot once, and Nick sagged, then lay still.

Then Jack went hunting for Joe Tweedy. The girl had already found Joe. He was alive, but shaking like a leaf. She herded him over to Nick Burton.

"You're an officer of the law," she said to Tweedy. "Clean up this mess."

"Yes, ma'am," Joe said. . . .

The kid came out of the woods looking scared. He had killed a man in there, his first, despite all his bravado. It frightened him and made him sick but he tried to put up a good front.

"I heard the shootin', sis?" he said. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, "and I'm going to be a lot better—now."

The kid said bitterly: "When the shootin' started she didn't want me to come back. But I had to."

Jack's head was beginning to ache fiercely. The kid's fool dream had not lasted long. It was a good thing that he had been disillusioned so quickly. Jack licked his dry lips.

"I got a herd waiting for me down to the Nueches," he said very slowly, because he had trouble thinking through his headache. "I'm figurin' on signin' on your sister, kid." He had to stop a moment. The girl had moved up close to him. He could feel her there, warm and real. "You always thought, kid, that I wanted something for those groceries. Well—you thought of it first, that's all."

The kid grinned. "That's swell, Mister," he said.

Jack said: "Maybe you'd like to come along."

The kid glanced up the trail where Boston Rose had gone. He muttered something under his breath. Then he glanced back at Jack and his eyes were level.

"You're takin' a hell of a chance," he said.

"I wouldn't say so," Jack said.

He put out his hand and the kid took it, and the girl put her hand on the top of theirs. Jack knew then that he had found something here at Wolf Rapids that he hadn't expected to find . . . something to last for a lifetime.

THE END

(Continued from page 8)

I have no doubt the battle of the pass scorned by Mr. King is based on the historical Battle of Apache Pass, where many a good trooper fell without seeing the enemy. Whether the survivors saw enough of the ghostly enemy to use their sabres, I cannot say, not being informed, but even that, I think, is not taking too great a license when it is considered that the yarn is written chiefly for entertainment.

There's a flash and dash to sabres, isn't there, Mr. King? So why not let the poor overworked scribbler use a sabre . . . please!

It's very easy to exaggerate—as easy for the critic as for the writer. It's easy to criticize too, and so easy to be wrong. (Who of us is not a little bit wrong now and then?) But we're trying, are we not Mr. King? And thanks for telling us about sergeants—the hard-boiled kind and the blue-blooded variety.

Dime Western has always been proud to hail its writers as men who know and love the Old West, and we think these letters from Olmsted and Bonham prove that our statement is no idle boast. And so, *muchas gracias* to you, too, Harry Olmsted!

Incidentally, in next month's issue of the magazine, we are presenting a line-up of authors—and stories, long and short—that we think is a humdinger. Walt Coburn and Charles T. Tyler will head up the fiction feast with a pair of colorful, dramatic sagas that struck us a being just about tops in their field. In addition, there will be a long "Friar Robusto" yarn by Harry Olmsted, a long story by William R. Cox, and stories in the shorter lengths by such top-hand Western writers as Thomas Thompson, De Vries, Everett and Olga Webber, and others.

The May issue will be published April 3rd!

NEW HOSPITAL SURGICAL POLICY

You, as an individual or your entire family (ages 3 months to 75 years) will be mailed actual policy made out in your own name, for 10 days' free inspection, if request is received during this introductory offer.

SEEING IS BELIEVING!

This new policy is different. It pays men and women up to $5.00 a day room and board for 90 days' hospitalization either sickness or accident. Children included. Pays $50 for childbirth; $20 X-ray; $20 operating room; $20 anesthesia; $20 laboratory examination; $10 medicines; $10 ambulance service. Doctor allowance for operations up to $150. Emergency draft benefit $50 included. Pays $1,000 accidental death or dismemberment. Policy is good in any accredited hospital in U. S. and some foreign countries.

Special Group or Individual Plan

	Mo.	Quar.	Semi-A.	Annual
Individual 18 or Over	$1.00	$2.90	$ 5.70	$11.00
Husband and Wife	$1.75	$5.08	$ 9.98	$19.25
Husband, Wife, One Child	$2.25	$6.53	$12.83	$24.75
One Adult & One Child	$1.50	$4.35	$ 8.55	$16.50
Each Additional Child	$ .25	$ .73	$ 1.43	$ 2.75

SEND NO MONEY!

Just write—giving name and address, date of birth, height, weight, race or color, occupation and condition of health for last five years, of yourself—and each member of your family to be included. Name and relationship of person to whom your benefits are to be paid in case of death. Actual policy will be mailed you for free inspection.

NO AGENT WILL CALL!

This new policy has been created for the benefit of those who can think and act for themselves, and save by mail. No doctor's examination. Write NOW! American Life & Accident Ins. Co., 231-C American Life Bldg., St. Louis 8, Mo.

REFRIGERATION and AIR CONDITIONING

MECHANICAL units everywhere need servicing. Soon new units will require installation service. You can be ready with reliable pay-knowledge of this big income field. Unique home study-plus actual practice plan prepares you to enter servicing or installing field or get into business of your own. Great opportunities now and later. Get facts FREE. Write today!

UTILITIES ENGINEERING INSTITUTE
Dept. L-5, 1314 W. Belden Av. Chicago 14, Ill.

Many Never Suspect Cause of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. They help most people pass about 3 pints a day.

When disorder of kidney function permits poisonous matter to remain in your blood, it may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness. Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning sometimes shows there is something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

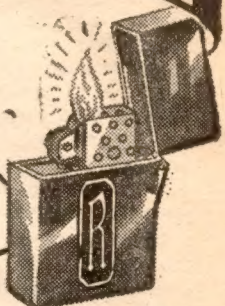
Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, a stimulant diuretic, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. Doan's give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

Biggest Smoker's Value Ever!

Windproof LIGHTER and POP-UP Plastic CIGARETTE CASE

BOTH FOR $2.98 TAX FREE POST PAID

Top slides open and pops up your favorite cigarette



A Matched Set You'll Be Proud To Give or Get

Both Personalized

With a Rich Silver on Black MONOGRAMMED INITIAL of your own choice

For Your Smoking Pleasure

A THRILL BY THEMSELVES . . . . . A TRIUMPH TOGETHER

Take the lighter, for instance! It's a genuine "Feather Lite," cased in gleaming heat resistant black plastic. Famed for the instant, positive action it's the favorite "flame" of smokers the nation over. Just a twirl of your thumb lights it—and its wind guard *keeps it lit.* And if you want the joy of added smoking pleasure, your answer is the matching POP-UP cigarette case, which is actually a cigarette butler too, ready to serve you on split-second notice! *Every* cigarette that bobs up out of a POP-UP is invitingly fresh, firm and enjoyably fragrant! They're a peach of a pair, both yours to own for only $2.98—and if you don't think you've bought a double value after seeing your thrilling twosome—we'll refund your money *cheerfully* . . . quick as a flash . . . *And that's a promise!*

MAIL THIS COUPON FOR SMOKER SET

IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES—Dept. RP32
618 So. Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

PRINT INITIAL IN THIS BOX ☐

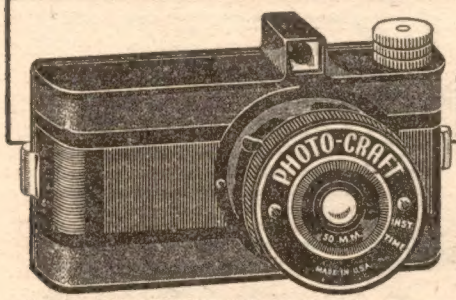
Please rush Feather Lite Windproof Lighter and Matching POP-UP Cigarette case personalized with initial printed in box above.

CHECK ONE

☐ I am enclosing $2.98. Send my Personalized Smoker Set Postpaid
☐ Send my Personalized Smoker Set C.O.D. I will pay postman $2.98 plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

COMPLETE 5-PIECE CANDID CAMERA OUTFIT



Includes all This!

★ GENUINE PHOTOCRAFT CANDID Type CAMERA
★ CARRYING CASE with Your Name in 23-Kt. GOLD
★ 3 ROLLS of No. 127 FILM

ALL YOURS FOR ONLY $3.98 POST PAID

CARRYING CASE With Handy Shoulder Strap INCLUDED

THREE ROLLS OF FILM INCLUDED

Personalized WITH YOUR NAME IN 23-Kt. Gold

LOOK AT THESE FEATURES

★ Genuine Simpson Ground and Pitch Polished Lens
★ Takes 16 Pictures on Any Standard No. 127 Film
★ Will Take Pictures in Full Color
★ Has "Bullseye" Level View Finder
★ Easy, Simple, Foolproof Operation

PICTURES YOU TAKE TODAY WITH THIS BIG 3-IN-1 OUTFIT WILL BE THE TREASURES OF TOMORROW

. . . For while time stands still for no one, the memories of happy times can be preserved by Photocraft. Your Photocraft candid camera outfit comes to you ready to go to work—with a handy shoulder strap carrying case Personalized with the name of your choice in 23-Kt. GOLD, *and* enough film for 48 exposures—for only $3.98 postpaid! Your Photocraft will also take full color pictures when loaded with Colorchrome film. So whether for a gift or for yourself, order *your* Complete 5-piece Photocraft Outfit *now!* Our guarantee is your assurance of satisfaction.

RUSH THIS COUPON NOW

Sold On A "Examine At Our Risk" GUARANTEE OF SATISFACTION

Yes, if you don't feel that Photocraft is everything you expected, you may return it in 10 days for a complete refund.

IMPERIAL INDUSTRIES—Dept. PC219
618 South Dearborn St., Chicago 5, Ill.

Rush my Photocraft Candid Camera Outfit at $3.98 with Personalized Carrying Case and 3 rolls of No. 127 Film. My money will be refunded if returned in 10 days.

Name Wanted In Gold _____
Please Print

CHECK ONE

☐ I'm enclosing $3.98 in full payment. Please send my Photocraft Outfit Postpaid.
☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. I am enclosing $1.00 deposit because I want my Carrying Case Personalized in GOLD. I'll pay postman balance of $2.98 plus postage.
☐ Send my Photocraft C.O.D. without name on Carrying Case. I will pay postman $3.98 plus postage.

Name _____
Please Print Clearly
Address _____
City _____ Zone _____ State _____

GET A HEAD START TOWARD PROMOTION...

Step out in LEE Work Clothes

Long wear and perfect fit are built into every Lee Garment. But more than that, Lee quality gives you that handsome, tailored appearance that leads to admiration and promotion.

First time you slip into any Lee Garment, you'll know why Lee Work Clothes are the choice of so many men. Take overalls, for instance. An independent survey showed that working men prefer Lee Jelt Denim Overalls 6 to 1 over any other brand.

For the finest quality work clothes . . . ask for "Lee."

THERE'S A LEE FOR EVERY JOB!

Jelt Denim Overalls
Union-Alls • Matched Shirts and Pants
Whipcords • Dungarees • Cowboy Pants
Industrial Uniforms

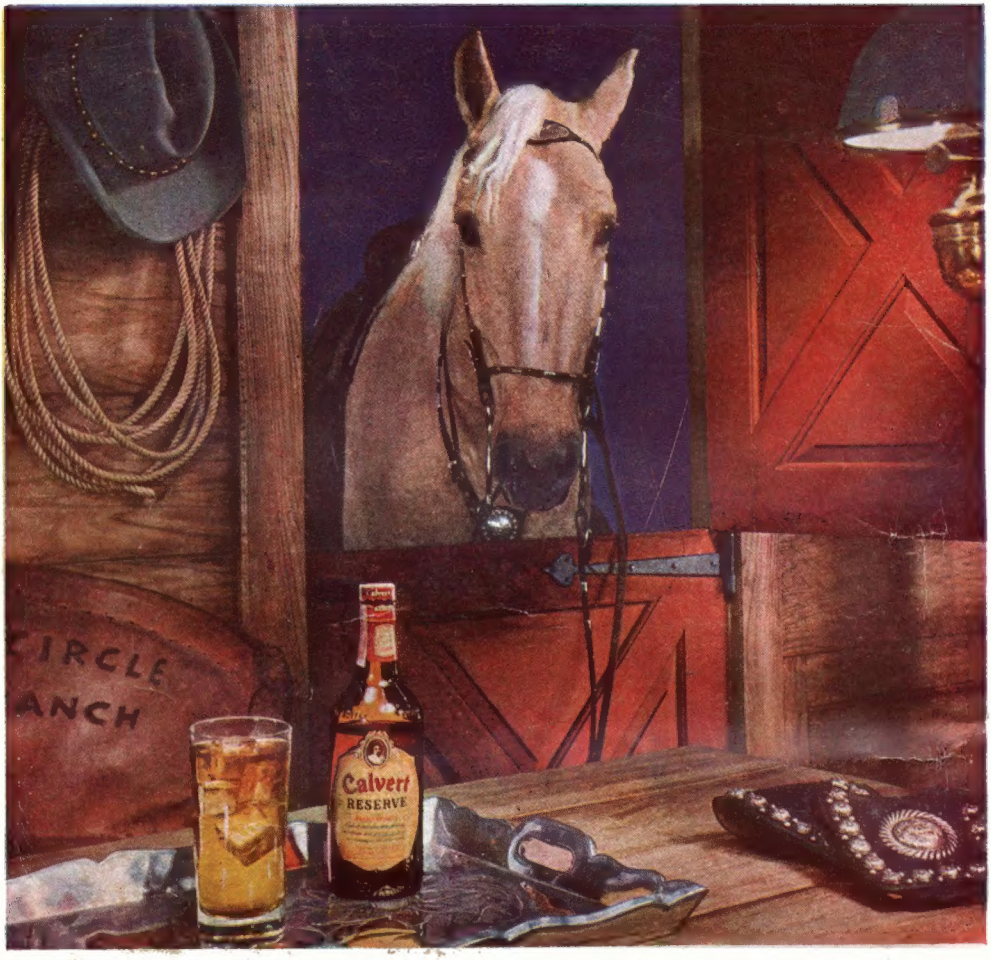
UNION MADE
Lee
Highest Quality
WORK CLOTHES

THE H. D. LEE COMPANY, Inc.

KANSAS CITY, MO. • MINNEAPOLIS, MINN. • TRENTON, N. J.
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF. • SOUTH BEND, IND. • SALINA, KANS.

WORLD'S LARGEST MANUFACTURERS OF UNION MADE WORK CLOTHES

COPYRIGHT 1946
THE H. D. LEE CO., INC.



"That tenderfoot certainly is wise about *some* things"

MAYBE he doesn't know a stirrup from a saddle . . . but judging from that glorious Calvert highball, he sure knows his whiskey!

Make no mistake, Calvert is very definitely *the real thing* in whiskey. Fact is, we've blended more fine whiskey in our time than any other distiller in America . . . and that magnificent Calvert blend has *yet* to be matched! Moral (and this is right from the horse's mouth): It's just plain horse-sense to make sure *your* next highball is made with Calvert.

. . . . . ***It's the real thing!***

Clear Heads Choose **Calvert**

Calvert Distillers Corp., N. Y. C. BLENDED WHISKEY 86.8 Proof.
Calvert "Reserve"—65% Grain Neutral Spirits . . . Calvert "Special"—72½% Grain Neutral Spirits